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The truth behind XNA an
means for videogaming's
Previewed: Sudeki, Onimus
Red Ninja, Red Dead Revo
FF XI, Thief: Deadly Shadov
Reviewed: Transformers,
Legend Of Zelda: Four Sw
Astro Boy, TOCA Race Dr
Plus: Nokia's new N-Gage









XNA™

Microsoft ends the console war









This month's cover was originally pencilled in to carry images of an Xbox 2 nature – shots of early technical demos along the lines of the infamous Xbox 'mousetrap room', perhaps, or a game character rather more convincing than the star of one-time Microsoft favourite *Malice*. Those plans were cast aside some time ago, however. Why would the Redmond corporation risk turning consumers' heads away from its first attempt at a console at this point, when the likes of *Halo 2* and other format-defining titles are still lingering tantalisingly on the horizon?

Microsoft can hardly blame gamers for being expectant, though. It has vociferously pledged, after all, that it will be first to market with a next-generation console. No way will it allow Sony to grab the early advantage with another iteration of its world-beating PlayStation, goes the battle drill.

Back to the cover, and the mysterious XNA that features in place of explicit Xbox 2 grandstanding. What is it? That's for our six-page lead news story to explain in some detail. What's worth pointing out here is not so much precisely what it does, but what it could represent, and that's a unified development platform with the potential to work across any videogame console or personal computer box.

And, yes, that includes new hardware from Sony and Nintendo. All they have to do, according to XNA execs, is pick up the phone and give Microsoft a call.

Could this ever happen? Somehow, we can't envisage Hiroshi Yamauchi's cohorts ever sanctioning such a thing. And Sony has everything so much its own way that it's difficult to imagine the company even entertaining the notion of getting into bed with what it perceives as an also-ran.

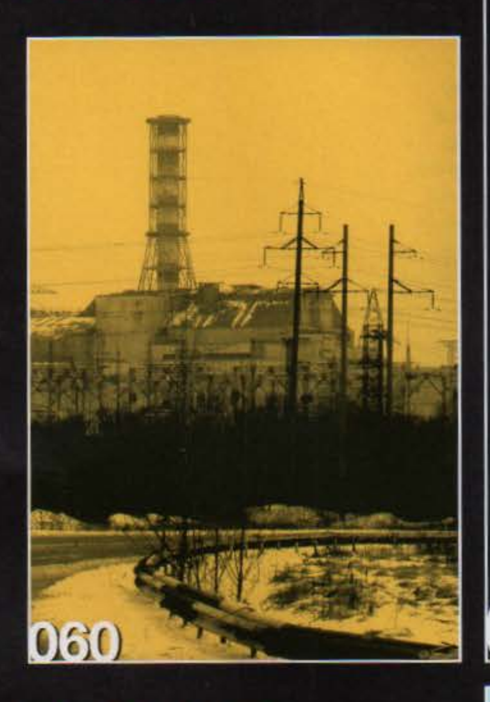
But the offer is there, and its existence reveals a mature and level-headed Microsoft with a genuine desire to make the videogame world more comfortable for developers and, by association, more pleasurable for us. All it will take is for other companies to buy in to the vision.







Features











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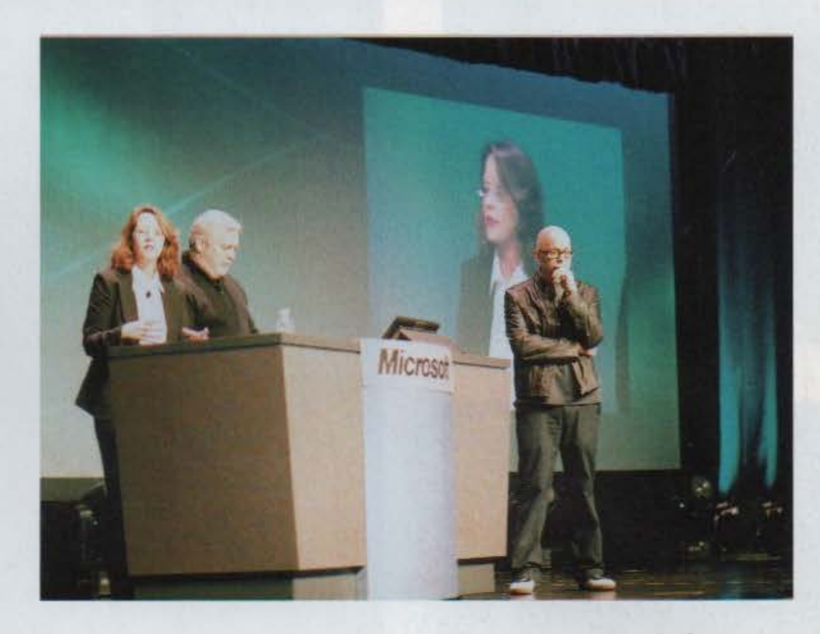
"The only way outta here is that valley that leads to the east. But I wouldn't wish that on a broke-dick dog."


XNA
TM

Microsoft defines next-generation strategy

XNA has the power to win Microsoft the next console war. More importantly, it could make console wars themselves redundant. But how does it work?

First there were rumours that Xbox 2 would be unveiled at 2004's Game Developers Conference. Then there were rumours there'd be nothing. When we got to San Diego, the truth was far stranger. Microsoft had assembled a room of jetlagged, crunch-worn and hungover developers to sell them little more than an idea: XNA. The 'X' comes from Xbox and DirectX, the 'N' stands for next generation and the 'A' for architecture. So what actually is it? Depends who you ask. "It's a cross-platform, industry-wide software development platform which will bring the worlds of Xbox and Windows together,' rattles off **Peter Moore**, an MS corporate vice president, adding another layer to the confusing fog of corporate lingo. **J Allard**, CVP and chief XNA architect, has a sheaf of manly metaphors for the more literal minded: XNA is the mortar of game development, the plumbing of game design, the hardware shop of game production. Little wonder their smoke-and-mirrors presentation met with a muted response.



"The point about these demos is not their technical accomplishment, but to demonstrate how flexible and rapid the XNA process is"

In short, XNA is a very simple idea. Microsoft intends to standardise the tools developers use – to standardise them across Windows, Xbox and Windows Mobile platforms and to standardise them across this generation, and the next, and then the next. It's an obvious move. **Chris Donahue**, Windows gaming's lead technical evangelist, explains: "We needed to get our house in order. I'd go and meet developers, and the next day the Xbox team would visit the same developers, and they'd say, 'You know, there were some guys here yesterday, and they have the same tool which does the same thing but has a different interface. So my people have to waste time learning two different things.' Fixing that's a 'duh', right?"

'Inclusive' is the big word for XNA. Although Microsoft will oversee the structure, the plan is that developers and middleware manufacturers will request and supply modules which snap into it. XNA will be opt-in – developers can pick and mix whatever bits they need – physics and particle engines, sound creation tools, AI architecture – and choose to slot in their own, private, specialist systems wherever they wish. It's this modular nature of XNA that should prevent any possibilities of 'sameware' – the spectre of middleware-dependent, identikit games.

The demos

In order to illustrate such a nebulous idea, MS presented three demos, which have since been widely circulated as being 'Xbox 2' footage. While that's not entirely inappropriate – Moore himself refers to them as 'next-generation experiences', it is fundamentally misleading. The point about these demos – run on Windows XP PCs with high-end Intel chips and a mysterious 'next generation' ATI graphics card – is not their technical accomplishment. Their purpose was never to show you what kind of graphics to expect from the next Xbox. Instead, they were to demonstrate how flexible, rapid and 'joined-up' the XNA development process is. The Xenomorph demo, in particular, was presented as a



J Allard remains at the fore of Microsoft's gaming aspirations. He was joined on stage at GDC by Windows platform evangelist Chris Donahue and Laura Fryer, director of the company's advanced technology group









The highlight in terms of demos was this car-crash sequence, which was set up and replayed from various angles. Realtime deformation was at the centre of its appeal, although developers in attendance couldn't help but acknowledge its shiny surfaces, too

testament to how well artists, animators and sound technicians could work together from the outset, rather than having to phase their contributions together in sequence.

If this was the purpose of these demos, then they were a dismal failure. Microsoft, inexplicably, could supply no information on how quickly these demos were assembled, or on the make-up of the teams that produced them. "It's kind of a difficult question to answer," hedged Donahue. "It was a couple of months. I don't have an exact date on that." Although he points out that XNA is still in its infancy, we have no way of verifying MS's word on its potential to speed up and streamline the game development process.

So why is that potential needed? Allard is in no doubt that the games industry is facing a crisis. The underlying problem is the raising of consumer expectations and their unwillingness to pay more for their games. He believes gamers' demands will be endlessly inflationary – battle scenes straight out of 'The Return of the King', online play, epic stories, sustained downloadable content provision – and that not only are developers already struggling to supply all this for a £40 price tag, but that soon they will find it impossible. This is compounded by the acute challenge of the rising costs and falling sales always associated with the transition from one generation to the next.

The result of these leaner times, claims Allard, is a loss of creativity. Developers who have the opportunity to complete games spend, he estimates, 80 per cent of their time on the game's plumbing and only 20 per cent being creative. Developers who don't get that chance are the victims of a bloated preproduction process. Allard becomes incandescent with disgust at how long the prototyping process can take: "Generally it's 18 months, or some ridiculous number. And all too often publishers kill the project and go back to their executives and say, 'Hey, I just saved us two million dollars'. Not, 'Hey, I just wasted three million on a cancelled prototype and let the next *Grand Theft Auto* drop from a talented developer who's so disillusioned they're leaving the industry."

Is XNA the answer to these problems? For now, it isn't. It's only the potential for an answer. "Let's just fast forward," suggests Allard, "and imagine a world where all the tools and middleware snap together like Lego. Imagine if everybody involved in tools says: 'My tool is free during preproduction. Up until the moment you get the green light, you can do whatever you want with my tool for nothing.' So now, preproduction is free and fast. Try before you buy. How great would that world be? Now maybe that's not exactly where XNA will land, but I think what I've described is possible."

The games

What kinds of games will XNA bring us? They may not necessarily be any better. Moore happily admits that while XNA might produce better games for the same money, it could also just produce the same games for less money. And although Allard is endlessly enthusiastic about XNA's potential to liberate creativity, he acknowledges that technology isn't the only barrier to extending the gaming canon. "Look at what happened to *Beyond Good & Evil* and *Prince Of Persia*. I love those games, played them both to completion, but their success doesn't reflect their creativity. There are still execution problems, timing problems, marketing problems and we're not going to



be able to solve all of those." If that doesn't sound ambitious enough, then Allard can up the ante: "I've been walking around GDC, and a lot of developers have stopped me to tell me how much they like the idea. 'I love XNA,' they say. 'Can I get it for PlayStation2?' And I say: 'Have Ken [Kutaragi] give me a call.' We're not religious about it. I think standards are good for the industry, and I think as a platform manufacturer we have a responsibility to step up and solve problems, and if the problem developers bring to us most is PlayStation development, then we'll tackle that. It would be very disruptive in terms of today's business model, but we work with Dell, we work with Gateway and we even work with Sony on the PC front, so there's a possible solution there, but Ken has to make the call."

This is a startling concept – Microsoft's software arm providing the development environment for its biggest hardware competitor. Is this a move towards the game industry's dubious El Dorado – The Single Format? "That's one way it could sort out," agrees Allard. "You look at DVD players. I can buy 150 different models, but

Those XNA tech demos in full

Film Noir
Source: Microsoft Advanced Technology Group
This moody, largely monochrome offering showed a Bacall-alike woman smoking and chewing her lips seductively. She also tapped her fingers distractedly before leaving her cigarette burning in the ashtray. Hardly a thriller, however, hence the word 'ambience' featuring prominently in Microsoft's justification.

Crash
Source: Pseudo Interactive
The demo with the most impact, certainly, and also the one most obviously redolent of a traditional videogame scenario. The camera dwelt lovingly on a shiny blue sports car, before showing it speeding out of its futuristic garage and crashing head-on at top speed from multiple angles. Detailed motion and damage physics were evidently designed to demonstrate the potential capabilities of the next generation of driving games.

Xenomorph
Source: High Voltage
A video that certainly didn't do XNA any favours in terms of emphasising the possibilities of cutting-edge content, this was a disappointing medley of clichéd mutant creature types morphing into each other. High Voltage's furry dinosaurs and giant blue spiders seemed too much like ghosts of a past gaming generation.



















What is XNA?

It's an attempt to unify the game development process across Xbox, Windows and Windows Mobile game production. Here's what's announced so far:

Tools: Xbox-only tools such as PIX (graphics pipeline analysis) and XACT (audio creation) and PC-only software, such as High-Level Shader Language, will be available through XNA for developers of all Microsoft platforms.

Controllers: By implementing common APIs, XNA will make it possible to use the same controllers for both PC and Xbox. Expect to see the Controller S pushed hard as a standard PC peripheral.

Live: The Live back-end – billing, friends tools and security – will become available for PC games. This will make it easier for Xbox and PC gamers to play against each other.

What it isn't

Finished: This is the most important thing about XNA. What's been announced so far is only the very beginning. MS is now working with big-name middleware developers such as Havok and Renderware to add more tools to the XNA environment.

An Xbox 2 thing: Although Xbox 2 will be founded on XNA, the system will come into play as soon as this summer. MS expects the impact of XNA to be apparent on games released as soon as Christmas this year.

And why should you care?

Microsoft promises XNA will deliver 'more creative games'. It's not exactly clear what that means, but in the meantime expect more Xbox games finished on time, more simultaneous PC and Xbox releases, a large and impressive Xbox 2 launch line-up, and many more Xbox 2 exclusives.

they all play the same movies. How do they do that? Software. So is that the way the console market is going to go? It's definitely a possibility. I think more practically you'll see variations on the devices themselves, like the PS2 and the PSX – there will be hardware choice from a manufacturer."

The box

Speaking of hardware choices, it's time to dig in to Xbox 2. How does it plug in to XNA? Allard's answer is simple: "Last time around what we did was we made a box for DirectX – that's where the name Xbox comes from – we were building a hardware manifestation of the DirectX API. The next time we build some hardware it's going to be a box for XNA, and so the richer XNA becomes, the richer that box becomes."

However, MS's emphasis on software, coupled with its unwillingness to confirm any Xbox 2 details, suggests that what it has to show may not be all that impressive. After the heavy cost of Xbox's technical superiority over its rivals, is it fair to assume that Xbox 2 will have less of a performance advantage?

"That's a great question," laughs Allard, "but I'm not going to answer it. I'm not going to talk about our next-generation plans and what they might look like. A couple of things are happening. Technology is getting good enough. There are diminishing returns on having better graphics than what we demonstrated at GDC for a console that you buy at Dixons. Why would you throw more money at that problems when the consumer can't perceive the difference, and the creators can't even take full advantage of it?"

Does this streamlined approach mean Xbox 2 will be a lean, stripped-down racehorse compared to Sony's rumoured convergence carthorse? Not necessarily.

Allard elaborates: "We're going to talk to the customer and say: 'More and more of your leisure time is going away from television and towards the internet – tell us why. You love instant messaging? Well, we have some instant messenger software and if you want it in your living room, then we'll do it'. We're not going to be obstructionist, but at the heart is a game – that doesn't change."

The other XNA implication for Xbox 2 is a much closer relationship with its PC sibling. For the first Xbox, MS had it all to prove in the console arena. Endless jibes were made about mice and keyboards, menus and game installations, and Microsoft was determined to remove any trace of Xbox's PC heritage. So no Xbox mice, no matter how much *Halo* players cried out for them. No *PSO* keyboards even if you didn't want to talk like a robot. Now, with console credibility securely established, MS is happy to risk letting the PC back in on the act. XNA makes it inevitable that Xbox 2 owners will be playing the same games as PC gamers, at the same time, with the same controller and often in the same online arenas. "You can't do it for all genres," warns Moore, "but I think more and more you'll see the ability to link Live players on Xbox and PC. We're going to knock down the barriers."

Which is how, without showing us Xbox 2, XNA has showed us the skeleton of what to expect from MS's next machine. It will be first to market, it will have specs comparable with its competitors, it will pursue a policy of exclusive games





Ex-Sega man Peter Moore (right) joined J Allard to explain how Microsoft intends to bring console and PC audiences together via online gaming, promising: "We're going to knock down the barriers"



Microsoft's audience at Game Developers Conference 2004 wasn't always rapt, but even the most pessimistic saw the potential of its XNA strategy. Next stop, executives at Sony and Nintendo...

(assuming Kutaragi doesn't have an unlikely change of heart and pick up the phone), it will be aggressively online, have a fat launch line-up and will encourage the use of peripherals, add-ons and multimedia applications. And the games? Despite Allard's resolve, there's no evidence yet to expect anything startlingly creative. Moore, ex-president and COO at Sega Of America, is unlikely to encourage the kind of non-commercial brilliance that served the Dreamcast so poorly.

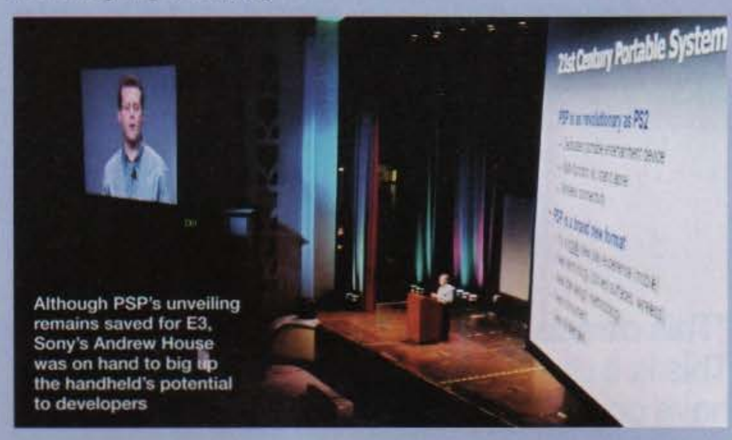
Of all the developers we spoke with, not one raised a voice against the prospect of making games within an environment offering greater stability, flexibility and responsiveness. The XNA plan – to squeeze Sony out of the market by cornering the market in developers, not in consumers – could not only win Microsoft the next round of the console war, it could end it altogether.

The fact that all the next-generation consoles will be working from same basic chip illustrates how the spec war is fundamentally over. XNA should offer the further possibility of smoothing over the transition from one set of hardware to the next. Next generation, we may no longer be taking about 'next generation'. Sony led the 3D revolution, and now Microsoft has the chance to lead gaming's evolution.

It's by no means a sure bet, of course. First, for XNA to work, Microsoft will have to motivate the global development community to cooperate under its sometimes unpopular auspices. The XNA environment will have to be robust and flexible – a lifebelt for developers, not a millstone. And while it's easy – and accurate – to say that the battle for performance domination is becoming irrelevant, there's nothing to stop manufacturers continuing to base their marketing on such claims. Rest assured that if Microsoft does go first to market, then Sony will find a way to claim that PlayStation3 is the world's most powerful console ever.

As for XNA, Allard would be happy if you never hear about it again: "This announcement wasn't for gamers, it wasn't even for the press. It was for developers. The customer, the gamer, shouldn't even know that XNA exists. All they should see is the games."

PSP's big day is coming



Although PSP's unveiling remains saved for E3, Sony's Andrew House was on hand to big up the handheld's potential to developers

No hardware was actually on display, but GDC 2004 saw Sony laying the groundwork for PSP's E3 unveiling. SCEA executive vice president Andrew House used the opportunity of his keynote speech on encouraging innovation to reveal some of Sony's plans. House claimed PSP had the potential to pick up sales even faster than PlayStation2 – the best-launching piece of consumer electronics to date.

And the software support is firmly in place with 89 studios – 23 in the US, 34 in Europe, 24 in Japan and eight in South Korea – already working on games. These include big names such as EA, THQ and Activision as well as full support from Sony's internal studios. One surprising inclusion was *Star Wars Rogue Squadron* developer Factor 5. Strongly aligned to Nintendo – in recent years it has only developed for GameCube – the support of company president Julian Eggebrecht spoke volumes about the pull of Sony's new device.

The first public demo of PSP software running was provided by handheld specialist Backbone Entertainment. Senior producer **Chris Charla** explained the company was looking to use PSP to launch original intellectual property, in this case a game called *Death Jr*, although it is working on two licensed games, too.

"Polygon for polygon, PSP is better than PlayStation2," Charla claimed. "It's a really powerful machine but it's as easy to program for as GameCube."

Some advantages of the hardware include support for techniques such as skinning, spline patching and hardware lighting, which allow developers to generate higher-quality visuals with less effort: "We've found PSP hits the sweet spot in terms of development costs," Charla said. Backbone's PSP teams consist of around four coders and up to ten artists, making it an economic platform to work on, always assuming it launches successfully and doesn't become a licence magnet in the same way as GBA, of course.

As for the ease of directly porting PlayStation2 code, Charla claimed this was technically straightforward, taking the company around four weeks to pipe over an existing game. However, issues such as controller configuration, screen size and ratio – PSP is a widescreen device – obviously take longer to work around, not to mention including support for features such as PSP's multiplayer capacity. Clearly this is an area Sony will be looking to capitalise on as it gears up the hype machine for the latest member of the PlayStation family.



Nokia unveils improved N-Gage

The Finnish giant's mobile game deck returns – revamped, restyled and reassuringly without the need to remove the battery when changing titles

Let's recap on the N-Gage story so far. Nokia's entry into the market was confident, bold and brash, but its machine met with unexpected cynicism from its stated target market, 'hardcore gamers'. Players said the controls were cumbersome, but not nearly as obtuse as the method of changing cartridges, which involves actually taking out the phone's battery. They said the games were adequate, but unspectacular and nothing they hadn't seen before. They said that the screen was curiously oriented, and too small. Mostly, however, they said they wouldn't be seen dead talking into it like a phone. Talking? Sidetalking.

"This device is a pure gaming experience. This is a direct result of the criticisms that have come back about the original device"

After that, a sea of new-generation handhelds took the headlines, and it began to look like the N-Gage was drowning. PSP hype, DS confusion, and a glut of next-generation palmtop handhelds splashed around, while gasping press releases from Nokia HQ showed the device keeping its head above the water – just.

Still, it was drifting out of sight, and industry insiders saw the Finnish company's capitulation as inevitable and imminent.

Behind the dismissive cynicism, however, Nokia was working to address these user complaints, and so it was that we headed to Huntingdon, just outside Cambridge, to meet **Mark Squires**, Nokia UK's director of corporate communications, and became the first to get our hands on the new, improved N-Gage. Not that the old model is going to disappear, as Nokia claims it will be sold alongside the new model, which is pitched at the sort of gamer who regarded the first machine as convergence gone mad – a feature-heavy behemoth that was perceived as a jack of all trades, master of none.

If the Finnish company's first message was confused – this is a phone, this is a gaming machine, it's both and it's neither – then it's making no mistake with what might be termed N-Gage 1.5.

"This device," says Squires, pointing at an original N-Gage, "contains an MP3 player and a number of other things, like the radio." He pushes the new product towards us. "*This* device is a pure gaming experience. This is a direct result of the criticisms that have come back about the original device.

"So while we still believe that the original N-Gage is something that brings a wealth of



The new N-Gage looks and feels more like a gaming device – and it behaves more like one, too: games can now be loaded into an external slot (above right)



experience to multiplayer gaming, the new device concentrates on the gaming side of things, and adds a number of changes."

Slightly smaller ("more discreet," says Squires) but a little thicker, the new N-Gage has a rubber surround which makes it more comfortable and offers the device greater protection. While the deep grey and orange decal is still unlikely to win the same aesthetic acclamation as an iPod, it certainly looks better than before. More than that, the smaller footprint makes the screen seem bigger, a psychologically positive step towards meeting the requirements of those who feel the N-Gage's screen is too small.

And while the screen itself is still vertical, the technology behind it is slightly different. The machine now uses 65,000 colours, a significant upgrade from the previous maximum of 4,096 and one that provides a better contrast ratio, according to Squires. Brought about by technological advances in battery life since the N-Gage's launch, this won't lead to a two-tier platform – all games, new and old, will be compatible with both N-Gages. The benefit is clarity, and that alone. "It has a more natural texture," explains Squires.

Sidetalking, the word the internet attached to the N-Gage's most ridiculous aspect, is gone. "It attracted a fair amount of quite amusing websites," acknowledges Squires. "We watched [the phenomenon] with interest." The new N-Gage is held flat on to the side of the head, like a traditional mobile phone. No more hiding from your friends when you need to make a call. "At the time it was done for the best reasons – to keep the screen clean – but sometimes you have to bow to opinion."

Also gone is the need to take the battery out of the machine to replace a cartridge. "As you probably know, we got a lot of criticism for that," says Squires, demonstrating the new system. A rubber guard masks a thin cart slot at the bottom of the N-Gage. Memory cards can be inserted and removed by displacing the guard and sliding them out, fractionally more fiddly than the GameBoy's clunk-click methodology, but leagues simpler than disassembling your phone. Along with the ability to autoboot games on insertion, the new N-Gage also allows hot-swapping, letting users swap cartridges on a whim.



The key layout is the same, with one exception: select is a separate button to the side of the D-pad, rather than a function of pressing the D-pad into its socket. If there's one thing the N-Gage didn't suffer from it was a lack of buttons, but its presence is hardly a major problem, particularly as it solves the fiddly selection difficulties of the original setup. The buttons themselves appear to have been refined slightly, as has the D-pad. In short, it feels more like a gaming machine, less like a phone.

That leaves one thing to be addressed. The games. While the N-Gage has seen several decent cross-platform ports (and a few less-than-decent ones), it's yet to own an exclusive selling point of its own. That looks set to change with the next generation of software, which is going to play to the machine's strengths. "The main reason to own an N-Gage is so you can play multiplayer wireless online games," explains Squires. "You can have several levels of connectivity: you play on your own, you play with Bluetooth with people in the same space as you, and you can play with people across the N-Gage arena – you probably know that's been attracting a lot of praise recently – but now you can go to the next stage and play online against thousands of other people." Illustrative of that, Sega's recently announced *Pocket Kingdom: Own The World* will appear on the machine in the third quarter of 2004.

It's a good start, but is it enough? Time will tell, because while Nokia is showing fighting spirit, the future of the N-Gage will depend not just on its (much-needed, and mostly successful) hardware revamp, but on the quality of support from big-name developers.

CUTTINGS



Bioware recognised by jury of peers
Star Wars: KOTOR emerged victorious at 2004's Game Developers Choice Awards, presented during the Game Developers Conference. Bioware's RPG scooped a hat-trick of awards, including the ultimate Game Of The Year accolade. Other winners included *Call Of Duty* and *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time*, with two awards apiece. The Lifetime Achievement award was bestowed upon Mark Cerny, developer of *Marble Madness* and recently a key gameplay consultant on the *Ratchet & Clank* series.

Capcom rolls in the Clover
In response to continuing financial difficulties, Capcom has dissolved its underperforming PC department as well as Production Studio 6 (*Chaos Legion*) and the Nagoya branch once headed by Yoshiki Okamoto. The company plans to create a series of studios owned by, but independent of, Capcom itself. The first will be Clover Studio, headed by *Viewtiful Joe* creator Atsushi Inaba. The studio is predicted to be developing three to four titles when it opens on July 1.

Rez sequel for handhelds?
In a post-GDC interview with GameSpot, ex-UGA head Tetsuya Mizuguchi went on record to say that he would like to develop his next title for either the PSP or the Nintendo DS, and that "in his mind" it would be a *Rez* follow-up, if not in name. Given his track record for stylish and mould-breaking games, this would be a coup for either handheld. *Rez*-heads are advised to celebrate with caution, as Mizuguchi is still in the process of establishing his new studio. More news soon.

Rendering error
ARM has not licensed its MBX design to Texas Instruments, as was reported in E135. Texas Instruments actually licenses PowerVR MBX, which is an Imagination Technologies design, directly from IT – as do Intel, Sunplus and Renesas. ARM has licensed PowerVR MBX to Samsung. We apologise for the error.

Experimentation excels at Screenplay

Nottingham's Screenplay festival combined videogaming's history with the present, as well as mixing in a dose of game-inspired visual arts

The retro scene proved a popular part of Screenplay, with plenty of old computers and arcade machines available. A large-scale version of *Pong* in the bar proved popular

Held over two days at the Broadway cinema in Nottingham, the fifth Screenplay festival proved an apt demonstration of the breadth of culture currently developing within the medium of videogames.

Mixed up with the arcade machines, C64s and other historical paraphernalia came a strong visual arts strand including work from performance artist Stelarc and animation by one-time Bell Lab resident artist Lillian Schwart. More traditional game-oriented events included Climax Nottingham talking about its forthcoming massively multiplayer *Warhammer Online*, a knockout contest to find the best gamers, and the results from the festival's inaugural design-a-game competition, Regain The Game (see 'Screenplay regains games').

"The highpoint was the broad mix of people who got involved," claimed the event's co-ordinator **Rasheeqa Ahmad**. "Many people came who hadn't been before and the resulting mix of cinema audiences with games industry people, artists, filmmakers and university researchers meant these folks could bring different approaches to many subjects and find out about each other's work."

Set up as a collaboration between the Broadway's education department and the Nottingham Trent School of Art and Design, Screenplay is designed to focus on the subject of future worlds, both in videogames and more experimental interactive media.





One of the highlights of the Screenplay festival was a performance of Stelarc's CG 'Prosthetic Head.' A type of AI expert system, it answered attendees' typed questions and also attempted to sing



The performance of Stelarc's 'Prosthetic Head' project was one such example. The Australian artist, who is a principal research fellow at Nottingham Trent University's Performance Arts Digital Research Unit, demonstrated the CG version of his head, which he knowingly labels a 'reasonably informed and somewhat intelligent artificial head'. Constructed from off-the-shelf components including an IBM text-to-speech engine and a US-located database, you can type questions which the head will answer using realtime lip-syncing. In addition, it 'performed' a special composition with a trio of musicians.

Another strand of the festival was the retro element. Curated by Ian Pare and the Nottingham Evening Post's games reviewer **Paul Drury**, this featured some playable old-school favourite games from the likes of Free Radical Design's David Doak (*Super Bomberman*) and *Elite* co-creator Ian Bell (*Chuckie Egg*)

"I'm pleased there's so much cutting edge stuff and art contributions, but I feel it's important to remember the actual games themselves and the history of the medium – that's where Ian and I like to think we contribute," Drury explained.

He also held a live webcam interview, in the style of Desert Island Discs, with adventure game pioneer Scott Adams. "Scott is one of my childhood heroes. I've interviewed him before and thought it would appeal to a wider audience," Drury said. Just for the record, Adams' choices for his desert island retreat included *EverQuest*, *Rollercoaster Tycoon*, *Deus Ex*, *Sim City* and *Colossal Caves*.

"The diversity of the festival is impressive," added Drury. "Where else could you find teenagers in Slipknot hoodies watching a giant prosthetic head muse on the existence of God, hear bearded academics rant about power relationships in gaming or see a nine-foot-tall joystick urge a bemused bar crowd to pelt an effigy of Tony Hart with egg boxes?"



"Where else could you find teenagers in Slipknot hoodies watching a giant prosthetic head muse on the existence of God?"



Adventure game pioneer Scott Adams hooked up for a live webcam interview with the Nottingham Evening Post's games reviewer Paul Drury



Winner of the first Regain The Game competition was *Gene Sequencer*, a 2D Flash game in the style of *Asteroids*

Screenplay regains games

The first time Screenplay had run a game design competition, Regain The Game had an open submission policy which accepted all manner of games or interactive entertainment projects. This was narrowed down to a shortlist of three which were available to play during the festival: *Gene Sequencer* – a 2D Flash game in the style of *Asteroids*; *The Fabulous Adventures Of MC Walker* – a RenderWare-powered music mixing game; and Ellie Harrison's *Challenge Series* – a simple arthouse piece. The process to decide the winner generated a lively debate on the subject of what actually defined a game, with particular focus on the perceived need for narrative structure and creator-provided goals. Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, the winner was *Gene Sequencer*, which is available to play at www.genesequencer.co.uk

www.rtzen.com

Shades of the future

Startup graphics company RTzen claims its RT/shader tool will bring consolidation to the fragmented world of realtime shaders

When six former employees of Discreet, including a couple of core 3DS Max designers, decide to start a new graphics company, it's fair to assume they know what they're up to. Incorporated in 2001, it's taken the years since for RTzen to create its first product. Launched at the recent Game Developers Conference, RT/shader is, as the name suggests, a tool for the creation of realtime hardware shaders. These small pieces of code, which allow developers to directly target a platform's graphics hardware, are the hottest topics in videogame graphics right now.

Working at either the vertex or pixel level, shaders enable a wide range of visual effects, from animations to complex materials and cinematic lighting effects such as soft shadows and coronas. The sticking point has always been the complexity of actually writing the shaders. As pieces of code, the obvious option is to let programmers deal with them, but as visual effects they also require an artist's eye. And this is where RT/shader hopes to come into play.

"What we've done is create a standalone tool that works on a number of levels," explains RTzen's **Jeremy Hubbell**.

"From the production artist to the technical artist and the programmer, we offer varying levels of complexity – high-level, low-level and code – in which you can create your shaders."

This means, for example, that artists can create the look they're after using a high-level visual interface and then pass it on to a programmer who refines it at the code level and integrates it for the target platform using RT/shader's software development kit.

Perhaps the biggest problem for RTzen, however, is the existence of a growing range of free tools which claim to offer the same sort of flexibility. All CG packages such as 3DS Max, Softimage and Maya have their own internal shader creation tools while, more confusingly, there are also various different implementations of shader languages available, including Microsoft's Higher Level Shader Language, Nvidia's Cg and the forthcoming OpenGL 2.

It's this level of fragmentation that Hubbell hopes will cement RT/shader's usefulness. "One of the unique features is RT/shader's patent-pending method of creating shader code," he says. "This means we can support just about any shader language out there, because the output is filtered on the backend. So for us, the multitude of languages is great. Not only does it give developers the ability to select the language most suitable for their needs, but it makes RT/shader a much more compelling tool."

RTzen is working on a number of other tools, too. Hubbell won't comment directly on them, merely pointing out: "RT/shader is the beginning. We have set out to build our products on a solid framework where tools can be developed independently but still work together. That framework debuts with RT/shader, but all our products will incorporate flexibility, speed, and ease of use without sacrificing power."



Demonstrating both its flexibility as well as the power of shaders, these RT/shader screens show how in-game material effects can be created by blending various textures (car and mud) together with reflection and normal maps, plus added rendering effects such as brightness and falloff

To Skywalker Ranch, and beyond

www.thx.com

Originally established to service the movies, audio and visual specialist THX is now gunning to improve the quality of games



THX in the house

As well as its work in the content creation area, THX has its finger in the pie of consumer electronics. Working with hundreds of partners, THX Certification has been incorporated into the design of speakers, receivers, amps, cables and controllers from brands such as B&K, Krell, Yamaha, and Pioneer as well as PC sound cards such as Creative Labs' Sound Blaster Audigy 2.

One recent advance in this field has been the release of its THX listening modes. Launched at CES 2004, these are demarcated into music, movies and games modes, each of which is designed to replicate the sound experience the way it was created in its respective dubbing stage, mixing studio and recording studio. In terms of the game mode, this uses THX four-speaker adaptive speaker array technology to place point sources anywhere in the surround sound field.

These THX listening modes will be available on forthcoming home theatre components that have passed the company's THX Ultra2 certification process.

It's fair to say THX, founded by George Lucas, has pretty good brand recognition. Its logo has flashed up in front of the 'Star Wars' films, while over 2,000 cinemas run its self-styled deep note crescendo sting before starting their main features. The company, which was set up in 1983 to provide quality certification for cinemas, has evolved in the intervening years, and it now encompasses the quality of sound and visual content throughout the digital production chain.

Independent of Lucasfilm since 2002, its latest move is a certification program for game developers.

"In broadcast TV, the recording industry and film post-production there are tightly controlled processes to maintain the integrity of sound and video content," explains **Mark Tuffy**, THX's director of advanced technology. "From our discussions with game publishers, however, we discovered the studio environments where audio and video content were being produced lacked any form of quality standards. Monitors weren't calibrated correctly, and speakers and other mixing equipment weren't installed correctly or didn't perform to optimum levels. Considering the trend for developers to outsource work to external teams, it's a situation only likely to get worse."

THX's solution is its Certified Games programme. This begins with an on-site inspection of a publisher's studios, where THX's specialists check everything from the acoustics to equipment installation and calibration, workstation setup and speaker or monitor placement. Even the level of background noise and quality of room lighting are evaluated.

A report is then produced outlining any changes required. THX's engineering team also tracks the condition of the environment through a game's development to ensure its standards are maintained. Once completed, the publisher can then slap a THX logo on the game box, for which it pays an undisclosed flat fee per certified title.

Unsurprisingly, the first publisher to sign up for the service was EA, which has released five THX-certified games, including *James Bond 007: Everything Or Nothing* and *The Lord Of The Rings: The Return Of The King*.

THX is working with other publishers on forthcoming games, although at present it won't say which.

And there's more to come, too. As Tuffy somewhat cryptically reveals: "As the program evolves, we will consider creating new technologies, including tools that could offer the creative community a means to not only increase the quality of assets in games, but further increase efficiencies in the production process."





Two of the first games to gain THX certification were EA's *James Bond 007: Everything Or Nothing* and *The Lord Of The Rings: The Return Of The King*. Other publishers are also working with the company to get on the programme

OUT THERE
REPORTAGE





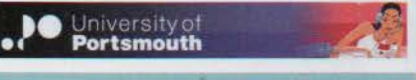
Shooting monsters in the dark, with the aid of GPS and some clever coding. It's like Ghostbusters... only not





The EMMA team at work. Perhaps now they could look into developing lightbulbs that illuminate entire scenes





Are girl gamers necessarily any different to boy gamers? Or is a conference like this just another kind of sexism?



Whatever the case, here's soon-to-be-Dr Krotoski, moving from the telly into academia and other media

01 Playable demo(r)

Holland: The final-year project of EMMA students at the Utrecht School of the Arts, Demor is one of the most interesting game projects we have seen in 2004. Developed for the Bartimeus Institute for the Blind, the game is 'a location-based 3D audio shooting game which is equally enjoyable for both blind and sighted players', according to its website. In other words, it's somewhat like playing a sophisticated version of singleplayer *Laser Quest*, where players begin in the middle of a large, flat space, and are equipped with a backpack which contains a laptop, GPS module, head tracker, headphones and a modified joystick. The GPS module and headtracker combine to locate the player's position and direction in the world, while the headphones provide the game's focus, and the aural feedback that lets them know where the monsters are. The joystick then lets them shoot the monsters. It's a neat, clever, intriguing invention, and one we hope to see refined (and publicised) still further. Read more at student-kmt.hku.nl/~g7/

02 Brave new girls

UK: Edge may not be a lady, but it's part woman. Which is why we can appreciate the need for a Women in Games Conference, one of which is going to be held at the University of Portsmouth on June 10-11. That said, we're not quite sure about the conference title, which refers to 'two days of empowerment for women working in the games industry'. Speakers will include Climax CEO Karl Jeffery, Sheri Graner-Ray from Sony Online Entertainment, and the ex-'Bits' presenter Aleks Krotoski, currently researching games for her PhD at the University of Surrey. There's also a chance to join in a 'networking meal' on the Thursday night, which sounds to us like a great way of picking up some super-hot girl gamerzz!!! Ow! Kidding, obviously. Everyone knows there aren't any. Kidding! Kidding! Ow. Stop it. More information – ow, self-harm, self-harm! – at www.womeningames.com

Soundbytes

"They are in poor physical shape, they eat unhealthily, grow fat and suffer insomnia"
Outraged consumer protestor Anne Folke in Yahoo!'s wonderfully titled news story 'Video Games Make Kids Fat, Violent, Swedish Experts Say'

"Sept 11 almost reminds me of a bad software programmer. You're working with this guy and he's doing the software for your game and the thing crashes and the guy goes: "It didn't crash." "Yeah, it did. I was just playing the game and it crashed." He's like: "No, no it didn't." You're like: "Yes, it did!" And he goes: "No, you hit the wrong button. It was your fault! Try it again. It's working fine now. Look at that..." and starts it up again. It's almost like Sept 11 is a software glitch where you go: "Yeah, you know, that never happened! Ah, nah, forget it." Some of the thoughts are just so unspeakable and so scary that you don't want to spend your life worried about all this stuff"
Eugene Jarvis gets philosophical

03 The pen is mightier, etc

Hyrule: It started on PlanetGameCube, a 'Cube website that breeds a certain type of Nintendo zealot, and its story that one of its forum users – one Paul Hantschell, username 'Coarse_Limely' – owns a replica Master Sword. Hantschel commissioned a Scottish blacksmith to produce the replica, and ten months later took delivery of the most expensive tribute to *A Link To The Past* we have ever seen – £1,800 worth of Hyrulian steel. Readers responded, awestruck to a man. Except for one. Chrstopher A, username 'malbogia', pointed out that he'd done the same thing in August 2003. "Dual ya anytime, winner keeps both swords!" he challenged. "I think I can safely say that my sword would cleave yours in twain like warm butter," responded Hantschel, and as far as we know the two are still there, twisting and turning their polished weapons like hardened roleplayers at a 'Lord Of The Rings' opening night. Anyway, like we've always said, it's not the size of your sword that matters, it's making sure you've got full hearts so you can shoot lightning from the end of it.

04 Mad maestro

UK: "*Maestro* is not a game, it's a lifestyle!" is the tagline for Mike Oldfield's game *Maestro*. Well, setting aside the dodgy PR for a moment, it sounds very much like a game to us. Players whizz around a 3D world where they must find those most un-gamey of collectibles, 'Gravitars', and bring them home to the objectively non-gamey 'mothership'. *Maestro* – not a game, remember, but a lifestyle – has other exclusive special features, like 'exclusive music', and 'instant messenger communication', and 'opportunities to play online with Mike Oldfield'. The latter might be a massive selling point to fans of… well, fans of 'Tubular Bells' and possibly fans of 'Tubular Bells II', but we wonder – for example – how many Britney and Justin fans it's going to bring to the ~~game~~ lifestyle? "Mike Oldfield has created the world of *Maestro* from the ground up with NO profit targets to attain," says the press release. Ah, right. Gotcha.

05 Moo-bile gaming

UK: The need for Sarah Baillie's 'Bovine Simulator Project' will be clear to anyone with veterinary ambitions. As she puts it on her site: 'Bovine rectal palpation is a difficult procedure for veterinary students to learn and requires considerable practice to accurately identify structures. The majority of teaching takes place on farms with veterinary surgeons, but it is increasingly difficult to ensure all students develop skills adequately by the time of graduation'. Or in other words, you don't get many opportunities to put your hand up a cow's arse, so when you do you need to make it count. The BSP uses SensAble's six-degree force-feedback haptic device, the PHANToM, along with a PC and a fibreglass model of a cow's rear end, to reproduce the conditions vets face in the field. That means more students can be 'trained to orientate in the three-dimensional anatomical environment, to develop the correct exploratory technique and to identify key structures, such as the uterus and pelvic brim'. Excellent! We're hoping that the next version of *Harvest Moon* offers full support for the device.

03





A Master Sword, in all its half-hewn glory, and in a more finished state (right). Good on warm butter, apparently

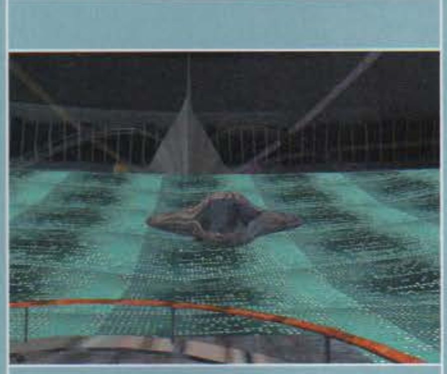
04



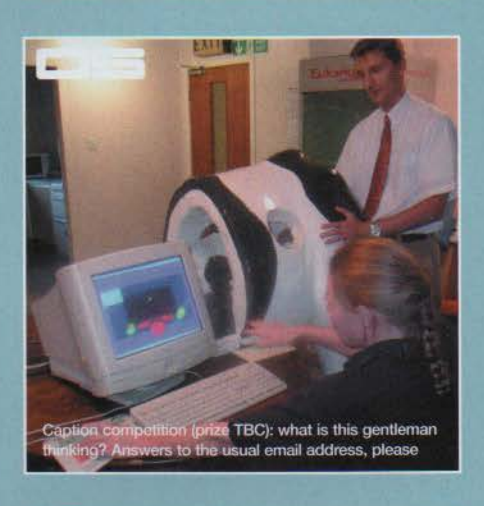
See the lifestyle of *Maestro*. See the swirly coloured blobs. See why it's not a game? Of course you can



What happens when people who make music decide to get down with the kids? Well, it's something like this



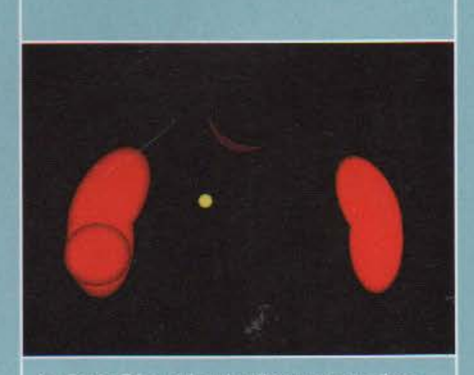
Still, at least you can't say Mike Oldfield's *Maestro* looks like a PC title from 1996. Actually, hold on…



Caption competition (prize TBC): what is this gentleman thinking? Answers to the usual email address, please

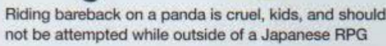


BSP's sequel, which deals with horses, can be seen on the right. We can see a franchise developing here



In a first for **Edge**, and maybe other game mags, these are horse ovaries. We don't know what the yellow bit is

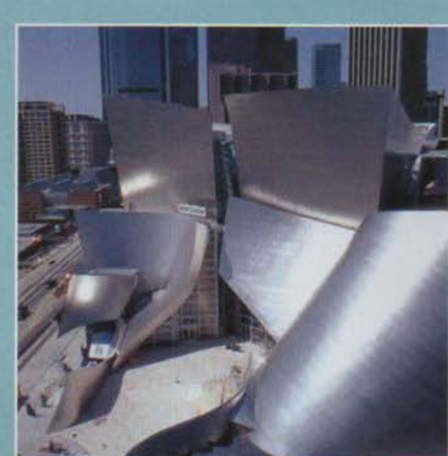



Riding bareback on a panda is cruel, kids, and should not be attempted while outside of a Japanese RPG





The Black Mages claim to have once played a two-day concert in Japan. Two days? Now *that's* rock 'n' roll




A concert hall, soon to be filled with strains of *FF* music. Bet it won't be as good as *FFIII*'s opera scene, though





Head to the museum's website, www.ammi.org, for more details. Three tokens come free with your ticket


Once upon a time, coin-op cabinets looked futuristic. Well, in a sort of 1970s-vision-of-the-future kinda way

06 A Square deal

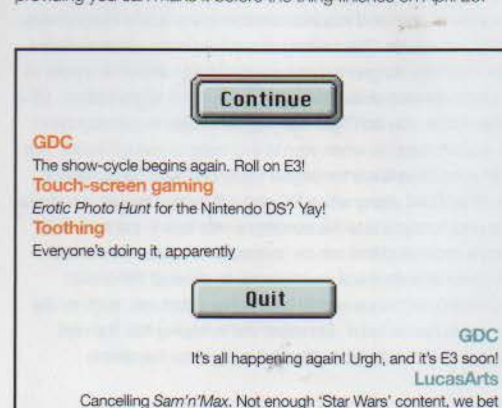
Japan: Can you read and write Japanese? Do you have plenty of time on your hands? Are you a mediocre writer with a fetish for overblown nonsensical fantasy stories with paper-thin characterisation and plot twists stolen from M Night Shaylaman's bins? Then Square-Enix's 'write a *Final Fantasy* novel' competition is for you. The generous conglomerate is offering lucky fanboys the chance to script a novel using its own characters – creations as diverse as a schoolgirl, or a goth schoolgirl, or a dark-yet-interesting hero-to-be. Prizes on offer include cash, comic and novel deals, and the thrill of seeing your creation milked for all its worth by the creators of box-office smash 'Final Fantasy: The Movie'. Entries must be postmarked no later than April 30, but you're allowed to send in as many ideas as you want! Lucky old you.

07 Hip to be Square-Enix

US: Sticking with Square, we hope that those devotees about to put pen to paper have managed to get tickets for 'Dear Friends – Music From *Final Fantasy*', a symphony concert at the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles. On May 10 the LA Philharmonic will perform 'some of the most memorable music from a wide range of *Final Fantasy* videogames', all of which was scored by the series' musical director, Nobuo Uematsu. We first read about the concert on his site (www.square-enix-usa.com/uematsu), and we recommend a visit, if only for the section devoted to The Black Mages, Uematsu's rock band that cover *Final Fantasy* tunes live. "Six chefs have cooked up some *Final Fantasy* music for you," writes guitarist Tsuyoshi Sekito. "I'm sure you'll find it quite tasty!" Oh, we do, we do.

08 A blip on the radar

US: In 1989, the American Museum of the Moving Image held the world's first exhibition of videogames, and 15 years later it's at it again with BLIP, offering the chance to play like you're in a washed-out seafront arcade 20-odd years ago. Cabinets including *Asteroids*, *Defender*, *Frogger*, *Galaxian*, *Missile Command*, *Ms Pac-Man*, *Space Invaders*, *Space War*, *Tempest*, and *Tron* will be on display, so it's not a bad excuse to visit NYC, providing you can make it before the thing finishes on April 25.


Continue

GDC
The show-cycle begins again. Roll on E3!
Touch-screen gaming
Erotic Photo Hunt for the Nintendo DS? Yay!
Toothing
Everyone's doing it, apparently

Quit

GDC
It's all happening again! Urgh, and it's E3 soon!
LucasArts
Cancelling *Sam'n'Max*. Not enough 'Star Wars' content, we bet
Jason Rubin
He has, and good luck to him



09 Cloud Atlas

There's something of the palindrome about David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas. Starting with the journal of a 19th century Pacific traveller, it jump cuts into the life of a musical rake, hoping for a fresh start with a reclusive composer in 1930s Belgium. Then it's on to an investigative reporter sleuthing trouble at a nuclear power station in Gerald Ford's America, then a book publisher in a decaying version of the UK before we're launched into the future as civilisation slowly hollows itself out and collapses inwards. And, as palindromes do, the book then unwinds the way it came, concluding the characters' stories before ending as the near-death traveller finally makes landfall in Hawaii.

While interesting as a narrative device – it certainly provides the author with plenty of opportunities to demonstrate literary flourish – this structure isn't easy for the reader. Little of substance links the disparate characters, although Mitchell plays with notions of continuity and determinism. The journalist, Luisa Rey, orders the rake's rare masterpiece, The Cloud Atlas Sextet, and then wonders where she's heard it before, for example. All the characters also possess a small comet-shaped birthmark. It's not clear however what meaning he wants us to derive from his multi-faceted cast, but perhaps the closest he comes to a direct manifesto is via Adam Ewing, who when visiting a missionary settlement is bought face to face with the raptorial effects offered by progress. Whether Cloud Atlas is more than the sum of its beautifully written parts is a question never really answered.

10 The Queen Of Sinister

How to deal with the overwhelming influence of The Lord Of The Rings is a problem fantasy writers have had to wrestle with for years. The success of Peter Jackson's films has only compounded the issue. You can't compete with it, of course, but can you build upon its themes, upgrading them for a 21st century audience? On one level, Mark Chadbourn's Dark Age trilogy flirts alarmingly with Tolkien. The Queen Of Sinister, the second book of the planned three (although you don't need to have read the first), has passages strongly reminiscent of Moria's deserted grandeur, not to mention a menacing, implacable foe, the Lament Brood, riding in the wake of the Nazgul.

Set in an England where civilisation has crumbled back into the dark ages, even this pitiful existence is put into question by a plague which sweeps the land. The arrival of Crowther, a professor trained in the way of the druids, into a small village suffering under the plague's curse marks the start of Caitlin Shepherd's ordination into the ways of magic. Pursued by the Brood, they escape, crossing over into the underworld of Celtic mythology, searching for a cure. What raises this above the mass of other copyists has nothing to do with the nature of his fantasy world; with a background in investigative journalism, Chadbourn can offer a more cynical, even hard-bitten edge, to his creation. Sure, it's not great literature, but nevertheless it remains proof that even in the most barren genres, new shoots can break through.

09



Author: David Mitchell
Publisher: Spectre
ISBN: 0 340 82277 5

10



Author: Mark Chadbourn
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 0 575 07276 8

11



Site: **Build Your Own Arcade Controls**
URL: **www.arcadecontrols.com/arcade.htm**

11 DIY arcade controls

Everyone knows that the only real way to play games is hunched up against a cabinet, cigarette smouldering on the control deck, jostled by kids in the queue for chips, legs tiring with every extra credit. Everyone also knows that the generic arcade machine is a dying beast, so it's up to you to build your own, and we can't think of a better place to start than here. The site may be rudimentary in appearance, but its content is comprehensive, and should set you on your way to electrocuting yourself with an unshielded cathode ray tube in no time. Good luck!

12 Advertainment

Japan: How to make a Nintendo ad: simply hire an overacting pensioner and ask him to gape at his grandchildren's 'space-age' new toy while a jaunty tune plays in the background. *The Legend Of Zelda: Four Swords+* adheres stringently to the formula.





"My granddaughter is playing quite a strange game." Speak for yourself. What's wrong with dominoes?




"Yes, the TV is calling her by her name!" (a reference to *Four Swords*' simple text-to-voice function)



"That means your grandchild is very famous!" Ho ho, what a card. The pensioners chuckle along politely





Did you notice the clever synchronicity between the number of granddads and the number of kids?




A bit of game footage demonstrating the link-up between GameCube and Game Boy Advance




"Three ways to enjoy the link game experience." GameCube links with GBA. Did you get that?





And, hey, don't forget: GameCube links with GBA. The *Four Swords* logo naturally finishes things off

The city has sex with itself, RedEye supposes, stealing words from Conor Oberst and twisting them around to suit his own purposes, just as all overwrought emotional softcore demands. He's walking down the river with a friend, silently, and thinking about... what? About the lights flicking off in the apartment block on the other side? About lovers young and old? About how our environment morphs without us even noticing? He's thinking about the future, but then he always is.

His companion? She's thinking, too.

Edge arrived today, littered with reminders, like that Out There short on the apparently imminent advent of holographic technology, as if it hadn't been advented decades ago with the risible *Time Traveller*. It's a cliché of futurism, like the flying car, infinitely desirable, obviously flawed. It says, hey, finally the future's here, and we can... uh... play that 'Star Wars' chess thing, and... um... watch the 'Big Brother' house from every conceivable angle. It may be that holographic TV fails to provide much advantage over flat screen entertainment, but just removes artistic control from the director – takes away their ability to provide a window, and turns sweeping cinematics into static, all-angle stages. Why would we want that? And then Science Girl speaks, and RedEye remembers.



REDEYE

A sideways look at the videogame industry

Sex and the city

RedEye has known Science Girl forever, and in some respects they couldn't be more similar, but while RedEye's mind skips from one subject to the next, stumbling through logic, reason and getting way too bored before the end, Science Girl dissects conversations like she dissects insects in her lab. There are pauses for thought, infinitesimal accuracy, procedures followed at an unstoppable steady pace. Titles are underlined, diagrams drawn, methods detailed. At the end of each conversation there is a conclusion.

(For the record, this is also how she deals with boys. Science Girl is delicately pretty. She attracts the science boys and beyond, but if they knew what was going to happen – if they could see the mantis, if they could see the shrivelled husks by her side they would stay away. She dissects, takes them apart, strips them down to elements, consumes and destroys. Mostly with ego-shattering disinterest. She has never taken RedEye apart, but perhaps she's just playing with her food.)

This evening, Science Girl is considering something. She pauses, stops walking. RedEye stops with her, eyes fixed on the tide. "Are there erotic videogames?" she asks. RedEye pauses for a beat, to allow her to refine: "Not that Japanese adolescent wank-fantasy bullshit. Proper erotica."

The gentle river wind catches the last two words of that sentence and spins them, twisting, into the dark purple sky. Somewhere across town, a 15-year-old boy lies on his bed, mind pacing through a complex plotline involving alien schoolgirls and tentacles.

"I know you do violence," she says, jamming RedEye forcefully into the hideous collective noun of the games industry. "But do you do girls?" If RedEye was looking at Science Girl, he'd see her smirk. He's not, he's staring at the river, trying to look deep.

"I'll rephrase." She rephrases: "Are there Adult videogames, with a capital A?" No, thinks RedEye. *Sam Fox Strip Poker* through *Leisure Suit Larry* to *Sexy Beach II*. No, there aren't.

"No," he says.

"Why not?" Science Girl continues. "Pornography sold the VCR – it made moving images wildly and cheaply available. Porn sold the internet – it took away the cost, took away the shame. Porn even sold DVD players – multiple angles, high resolution, interactive entertainment. Isn't that your thing? So why aren't your people doing anything about it?"

Well, they're not RedEye's people, but it's a good question. When the hologravision – or whatever – finally arrives, it will not just be a low, low price that persuades people to get involved, but the opportunity they have to see some fine teen ass in a brand-new way. Adult videogames? Gaming's reliance on the science of violence means nothing. How many times has sex even been considered, let alone been handled properly, across the whole history of videogaming? It is ignored, or dealt with by emotional retards, becoming like scratchy sketches from the inside of a slow fifth-former's biology notebook. Crass, but ultimately harmless. RedEye doesn't object to filth, but for God's sake do it properly.

"Not sure," says RedEye. Science Girl tilts her head to one side, robotic consideration. "So you know sex sells. And you have all these virtual actors who die over and over again. And you've got an audience heavily weighted towards young men, the same demographic that gave Warner a reason to pay Halle Berry a million dollars to get her tits out in 'Swordfish'. But you daren't show so much as a pixellated nipple, let alone two imaginary consenting adults stripping down to their wireframes and getting it on like God-mode intended?" Pause. Conclusion: "Weird."

Even if consoles still can't recreate the imperfections of human skin, they must be capable of titillating just a little. Perhaps previous attempts, if there were any, sold poorly. Perhaps they were weakly constructed. Perhaps the subject's a dangerous taboo: if Janet Jackson's right tit is elevated to the status of a national threat, capable of causing thousands of middle-American children to grow up all wrong in the head, then polygonal booty is nuclear war. Perhaps no one wants it? RedEye doubts that.

Sex is ignored, or dealt with by emotional retards, becoming like scratchy sketches from the inside of a slow fifth-former's notebook

So: "Mmm," agrees RedEye, and the pair pick up their walk. Fade back to silence. It lasts for 100 yards, enough time for RedEye to go back to thinking about the future. Then Science Girl stops again. "I've had fantasies about EyeToy," she whispers into the wind. "What?" asks RedEye. She doesn't elaborate.

RedEye is a veteran videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with ***Edge's***

TRIGGER HAPPY

Steven Poole

These are the new gods



The setting: Blood Gulch, a multiplayer map from *Halo*. The characters: two Master Chiefs, one red, one gold. "You ever wonder why we're here?" asks Red. Gold replies: "It's one of life's great mysteries, isn't it? Are we the product of some cosmic coincidence, or is there really a God watching everything, you know, with a plan for us and stuff? I don't know, man, but it keeps me up at night." "What?" splutters Red. "I mean why are we *here*, in this canyon?"

The war against the Covenant is over, but the Red and Blue teams are stuck in a canyon with nothing to do but spy on the other side and bicker. This is the wonderful 'Red Vs Blue' series of comic shorts (www.redvsblue.com), made using *Halo*. They are an example of machinima: using game engines to make films, with editing and dialogue.

Although all the character models are Master Chiefs, the writers have imposed a hierarchy. Characters argue, joke and lament their posting in the middle of nowhere. It's like 'Seinfeld' in space, and aims at a real metaphysical poignancy. In many episodes 'Red vs Blue' achieves existential comedy, a sort of videogame 'Waiting for Godot'.

In this context, the limitations of the *Halo* engine become strengths. We never see the faces of the soldiers, so they remain generalised emblems of the human condition. Each Master Chief model is Everyman – is you. In the sense that each of us experiences a troubled, vertiginous relationship with the universe, we are all in our own Blood Gulch, from which there is no escape.

Arguably, the 'Red vs Blue' writers have noticed, and very creatively elaborated, a spark of absurdist melancholy that was latent in the game in the first place. What does it mean to have a self-contained space designed purely for fighting? What good does it do you to capture a base in a place that has no communication with the wider universe? What can you do in such a place if there is no fighting to be done for long periods of time?

You can read into many games an existential subtext – the notion that human existence is absurd and there is nothing external to ourselves, after the much-announced death of God, that we can grab on to in order to give life meaning. There has always been something inherently absurdist about gaming's cycles of cheap death and rebirth, failure condemning us to repetition and success condemning us to nonexistence at the end of the game. The more complexly representational game worlds become, the more strongly this feeling may assert itself. Does the necessity of wandering down miles of identical corridors not in some way mirror the meaningless rat race most of us live in?

Whether scriptwriters and designers deliberately put these ideas into games or not is beside the point – because videogames, like everything else, are cultural artefacts that reflect the prevailing philosophy of the age. This is one reason why so many games have structures that mimic earning a wage and shopping – get enough credits for your next gadget or biomod – because consumerism has replaced God as a defence against the absurd in modern western society.

In videogames, things used to be simple. It used to be the case that games would offer you a comfortingly uncomplicated command structure, so that your superior officer in effect became God and your existence was meaningful to the extent that you successfully carried out his instructions. Now, this simple scheme is becoming problematised. The defence of 'I was just following orders' is increasingly unavailable, as games bring a sophisticated strategy to the table that invites you to consider the consequences of your actions.

Does the necessity of wandering down miles of identical corridors not in some way mirror the meaningless rat race most of us live in?

I was especially impressed by two instances of this idea in *Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow*. The first occurs if you kill a harmless informant cowering in a lab. Your commander explodes with rage, but Sam Fisher responds sarcastically: "Fine. I won't kill him next time." That line works two ways: it expresses the near-psychotic functionalism of Fisher's personality, implying the retort: "Why are we even arguing about this? It's already done, get over it." Of course, it also refers to the fact that if you reload your save there *will* be a next time, you *can* choose not to kill your victim. The second comes when your commander orders you to kill a defenceless woman. The fact he is played by Dennis Haysbert, incorruptible President Palmer from TV's '24', makes this injunction to cold-blooded murder all the more shocking.

It sounds as though I am coming perilously close to the argument that story matters in videogames. In fact it's a slightly different point. I still don't care about the plot of *Pandora Tomorrow*, about what kind of threat needs to be neutralised, about how the world will be saved. It's about scenario instead. Story is a sequence of events that make up a narrative progression from one state of affairs to another, and we are driven by a desire to know what happens next. Scenario, on the other hand, is just one situation within which we are able to experiment with different actions and observe the consequences. *Pandora Tomorrow*, like other videogames, glues together scenarios with an overarching linear story. A scenario can be purely spatio-mechanical, such as a room with guards patrolling in distinct patterns and a certain arrangement of lighting and shadowy alcoves. Or it can, increasingly, be a more dramatised situation, such as the one above.

In such scenarios, games have just begun to explicitly investigate existential questions such as man's freedom to act and his relationship with time and the cosmos. These are still tiny baby steps, and I am not claiming that *Splinter Cell* is worthy to stand alongside the work of Sartre in this regard, but there is something in the nature of the interactive form, I think, that gives it a unique way to present such issues and force us to think about them. A much-repeated criticism of videogames by those who want to deny their potential as an artform is that, for all their flash and wonder, they don't tell us anything about the human condition. I suggest that, in a quiet way, some of them already do, and the future potential may be limited only by the philosophical imagination of designers.

Steven Poole is the author of 'Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames' (Fourth Estate). Email: steven_poole@mac.com

Ubiquitous. I'm sure you've heard the word. In Japan it's pretty much a buzzword at the moment, and I'd like to talk this month about the age of ubiquity.

Let me explain. In the past, households used to have one communication device that they shared. These days, everyone in the household has a device of their own, or at least will have in the very near future. During my childhood there were no computers, no such thing as the internet. There was only one phone per home, and this was just how it was – no one envisaged a time when it would change, or a reason for it to change. If you had two phones, you'd be the talk of the town. People would gasp: "Two phones! Are they that rich?" It was reality back then, but times change. Computers and mobile phones have spread across the world incredibly rapidly, and they've triggered the age of ubiquity because they are





AV OUT

Toshihiro Nagoshi, general manager, Sega Creative Center division

This is the dawning of the age of ubiquity

everywhere. It's extraordinary – the change has come so quickly, it's like living in a science-fiction world, the kind you'd dreamed about for years, like going from having just one car per household to families owning fleets of flying vehicles.

So why has the pace of change in communication devices outstripped development elsewhere? I think the reason comes from need and desire. As comms technology has improved and communication speeds have increased, there has been less and less lag on international calls. Everyone wanted that, and now you can have a chat with someone on another continent as easily as you can with someone in the next town. With mobile phones you can call or be called wherever you are – but not just that, because you can also check your appointments for the day, or even surf the internet at any time.

Again, these are obvious developments when you think about it – it's just what people want to do – but other things have happened that we could not have imagined. The internet and peer-to-peer file transfer have created new business models that nobody had thought of.

Because they were such new ideas, no one imagined the scale of the effect they'd have on society, and they were accepted without question. Then, suddenly, people felt a change. Peer-to-peer software has changed the value of everything, has made people question whether they should buy things at such high costs. That is a type of change we may end up regretting, and objections to peer-to-peer software are big news these days, but in the case of information exchange and communications, no one has ever objected to developments in this area.

Perhaps this is because they don't affect people in obvious negative ways, or affect large companies in harmful ways like file sharing can. Perhaps it's because there was no need to build a nuclear power plant to make them happen. Perhaps it's because the cost of development wasn't placed upon the consumer, but supported by the industry and the governments of countries that needed it, meaning the end users felt no financial pressure.

I believe all those aspects are important – but even if the impact on society seems so negligible, that doesn't mean that people using the devices shouldn't sit up and take notice of what is happening. The consumer has the power to change things by showing what they need and what they desire.

It is the consumer, after all, not the creator, who dictates the usefulness of any technological development. It may seem a simple statement, but it is a huge issue. Let's go back to the example of mobile phones. Some people use their mobile only as a phone – they make calls and receive calls, but wouldn't think of using it for anything else. Others use it as a phone, but also take advantage of the email function. Some go still further and take pictures with their phones, then attach the pictures to emails. There are those who watch news on their phone, and people who follow the stock market prices in realtime on their phones.

And then, of course, there are the gamers and the people who use their phone as a gateway to handling bank transfers. The range of things you can do these days on even the simplest mobile phone is just incredible.

The important thing, though, and the thing that I think is a lesson we can all learn, is this: you don't need to know the workings of every feature on your mobile phone inside out, just the ones you want to use. There's no obstacle to using it, no prior knowledge needed, and the device does not discriminate. There is no generation gap, and this is important if a device is to achieve a broad diffusion among society.

I think the same applies to videogames. The main issue for devices developed in the age of ubiquity is the problem of creating the perfect interface. Creators must somehow reconcile their incredible, bountiful feature sets with the varying competence of each and every user to make the experience friendly to everyone. That means that a user who uses two features must be as comfortable as one who makes use of ten. It means that even if there is something I can do that I haven't noticed yet, my lack of knowledge must not be a barrier to me. That is something I'm testing in game development right now. I'm absolutely sure it's important, and that it ultimately will offer many advantages, but it doesn't come without risks.

Is the snake trick in F-Zero GX a cheat, or something that enriches the experience, and best left for gamers to discover for themselves?

Any new concept or idea can have a negative impact on your game, or change the game into something else entirely. Concepts which aren't fully thought out can be abused by users – or even used positively to create techniques that creators wouldn't have considered during the game's development.

Is the snake trick in *F-Zero GX* a cheat, or something that enriches the player experience, and best left to be discovered for themselves? More than ever, we have to put a stupendous amount of attention into what we think, what we create, and what we deliver.

Times have changed, and we must be more ubiquitous than ever. See you!

Prior to Sega's recent restructuring, Toshihiro Nagoshi was president of Amusement Vision

I have to confess that over the past year and a half I have fallen in love with a PC. No, no, you ludicrous poltroon – not Police Constable Pulip of Scotland Yard, but a personal computer. Yes, I know that sounds as likely as NASA discovering Mars is a big ball of wool, but it really happened.

Like unearthing a hitherto unsuspected sensitive side to a long-term partner, or – more accurately – being forced to confront why you stayed with your previous lover for so long, this PC's willingness to cooperate with *Call Of Duty*, *Freelancer* et al convinced me that perhaps it wasn't a spiteful little ingrate like all those other bitches. It switched on and off. It hardly ever crashed and rarely slowed to a crawl. Basically, it played the games, man, and was a joy to spend time with. And then, somewhat inevitably, it all went horribly, horribly wrong.

Having been something of a fan of *Deus Ex*, I only PC game I'd wanted to play in the last four months wouldn't run. Because of my hardware. Or rather, Ion Storm had chosen to exclude a large percentage of game buyers from playing its latest title because it made development easier.

Resisting the urge to ram a chair through the screen (or, at the very least, up Warren Spector's bottom), I considered my options. I could take the game back to Safeway (in the real world people *do* buy their games alongside their groceries and wetwipes) and lose a 30-minute argument at the customer services desk. I could flog it to Computer Exchange, or go and buy a compatible graphics card. I figured, what with *Doom 3* and *Half-Life 2* coming along, that now was as good a time as any to upgrade. Three-and-a-half hours later (one hour in traffic, 15 minutes installing the card and the rest on the phone to PC World's premium-rate support line) I had a brand-new

It's now Sunday night. After a long week of work, I'd hoped to have taken this weekend off and spent much of it glued to a game I'd been really looking forward to. A £30 game I can't take back because, apparently, there's not actually anything wrong with it and I might be an evil pirate. That's £30 I could've spent on scotch. Or bloody loads of pick 'n' mix so I could sprawl on the rug, filling my awful gob with junk, for 48 hours.

The thing that really scared me wasn't that I had problems with *Invisible War*, or the fact that the folk on the Eidos forum had problems with it, but the fact that in Safeway the game was number one in their PC chart. Potentially, it had been bought by tens of thousands of gamers. Ordinary, massmarket gamers who, like me, had a basic machine with the wrong graphics card. Who, because they'd just spent nearly 30 quid on a game they couldn't return, went out and bought a



BIFFOVISION

Page 28, press hold, and reveal. 'Digitiser's founder speaks out

Work, dammit

rushed out to pick up the sequel upon the day of its release. That's right – I bought the bugger without even consulting a single review, such is my love of the original. Not to mention my utter disdain for all game reviewers who, let's face it, score games based upon who took them out to lunch most recently. Nevertheless, just to be on the safe side, I browsed a couple of magazines on the way home. They assured me that – after a dodgy opening level or two – I'd be treated to a quite spectacular experience worthy of the *Deus Ex* title. By the time I got home I'd whipped myself up into an unsightly fervour. My legs and parts of my chest were spattered with a ghastly paste, which pulsed erratically from my excitement duct.

Game goes in drive. Autorun. Game installs. Game doesn't start. I was faced with the blankest of screens. Heck, I couldn't even do that Ctrl/Alt/Del thing, and had to switch the computer off. The same nonsense happened twice more, before I thought to compare the minimum specifications on the packaging with those of my hardware. Processor and RAM-wise all was fine. The problem: I had a GeForce4 MX card and it didn't have a pixel shader, whatever that is, so even though I only bought the thing 13 months ago for £1,000 and it had run every other game perfectly ever since, it was suddenly obsolete. The GeForce FX card in my machine. The guy at the shop ASSURED me it would work.

Incredibly, it looked like the sunken-eyed twerp may have been right. This time, instead of being confronted with a sneering message telling me my graphics card was a pile of steaming horse eggs, the game loaded up. Here were corporate logos! And menu screens! And an almost bearable opening animation movie thing! And then a blank screen. A screen so blank and black and cancerous that it could've been laughing at me hard enough to feel the spittle flecks on my buttocks. I tried installing again, to no avail. I tried downloading the latest drivers from Nvidia with no result. I tried ringing Eidos' customer support, but after 14 minutes I learned they had all gone home for the weekend. It was only when I went to the *Invisible War* message boards that I found any sort of solace, in the company of my fellow gamers.

The thread titles spoke for themselves: 'Really bad problem!', 'Sweet Jesus, help me!', 'Crash problem!', 'Big problem!', 'Why can't I get this game to run?!', 'Game crashes as soon as it loads!' And so on and so on, ad infinitum...

That's £30 I could have spent on scotch, or bloody loads of pick 'n' mix so I could sprawl on the rug, filling my awful gob with junk, for 48 hours

new graphics card, costing £160, and then invalidated their warranty by installing the card.

Then the game still wouldn't work because, basically, Ion Storm and Eidos had rushed out something unfinished to meet some sort of deadline set by the financial markets and their accountants. They couldn't take the card back, as the shop wouldn't accept it after they'd opened the anti-static bag, or something. Maybe they'd only bought the sodding game in the first place because some 14-year-old reviewer in 'Super Spaz Games Monthly' had given it 9/10 purely because Richard from Spunk PR said he might be able to get him over to CES this year if he did.

It sucks, friends. It's an insult that the games industry works in this unsightly, incestuous fashion with one purpose alone: to ruin our lives. Oh, all right, that's probably a bit melodramatic. The one consolation in all this is that, for once, I'm not blaming my hardware. In fact, I'm having unnatural, repulsive sex with it even as I type.

Mr Biffo is a semi-retired videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with ***Edge's***

prescreen

Incoming electronic entertainment from across the globe

Edge's most wanted

Half-Life 2

Half-Life 2 on the most wanted list? It goes without saying. Even if we don't mention it every second from now until release, *Half-Life 2* is always on our minds.



(PC) Valve

Death Jr

At first glance, this Burtonesque bagatelle looks sort of cute. With all due respect to Digital Eclipse, though, what we really yearn for is our first touch of PSP...



(PSP) Digital Eclipse

Kuon

From's dark fantasy looks to mix the haunting production design of *Otogi* with lashings of blood and darkness. We await, while hiding behind the sofa.



(PS2) From Software

Outrun 2

A friend recently confessed to spending £70 on this in one session. News of a console conversion is needed soon in order to avoid a similar financial faux pas.



(Format TBC) Sega

I'm sorry, I'll come in again

If at first you don't succeed...

The parallels are obvious, and well documented. A company dominant in another technology announces its intention to move into games, and is greeted with snorts of derision. The hardware is launched, and its obvious faults are catalogued with glee. Software is torn apart and condemned, the viability of the project as a whole dismissed as 'doomed'. It's easy to forget, now, that Microsoft announced its entry into the console market only four short years ago. The machine and its unrivalled performance have become such a familiar fixture that it's hard to believe the rancour it provoked: the dreadful looks, the dreadfuller controller, the dreadfullest price. The software, other than the radiant *Halo*, was the lowest scoring of any launch machine reviewed in this magazine.

Nokia must feel similarly hard done by. After more than six months, its 'game deck' has had no conventional coverage in this magazine, corralled in the news section until it wins its gaming spurs. It breaks its duck this month, with an Alpha (p043) on the dazzling, dinky and potentially revolutionary *Pocket Kingdom*. It would be understandable for Nokia to blame this lack of coverage on prejudice, on the near tribal hostility that some sectors of the gaming world specialise in. The problem is, that wouldn't be the truth. We haven't covered the N-Gage because, up until now, it hasn't been worth it. The hardware flaws – the sim card requirement, the take-the-battery-out-to-change-the-game design – were insuperable, and the software was lacklustre. At GDC, while talking endless rings around the question of Xbox 2, we found a word cropping up unexpectedly in Microsoft's vocabulary: humility. Almost everyone we talked to about Xbox attributed its success, in part, to the humility the company showed in fixing its problems. It's not really a word you'd associate with the firm's bullish press releases in the first year of the Xbox's lifespan, but actions are more important than words. The price drop, along with the free games sweetener, wooed customers and prevented early adopters from feeling as burned as they did after the unapologetic N64 price slash. The Controller S, too long coming, set a new standard in design and has become the favoured joypad of many contemporary gamers.

News of 'N-Gage 1.5' (p12) shows that it's time for Nokia's words to give way to similarly humble action. It's only a beginning, but Microsoft's achievements point the way to just how much success it could bring the company.













Sudeki

Spit and polish is all that's needed to complete Climax's fantasy adventure; it's been a long time since a UK devco produced an RPG this sparkling.





Magic and missile attacks look spectacular. Interestingly, projectiles are aimed and launched from a firstperson perspective





Big-breasted women. It's what the kids want. Or at least it's what they say they want. When Climax pitched this project to Microsoft, before the Xbox was even out on the shelves, focus testing was all the rage. You can imagine the sessions: notepads and cookies and copious amounts of caffeine-rich pop. It's probably why some of the characters look part anime and part WWEs Trish Stratus.

The 'tits and asses' we referred to in our preview (**E**118) are not going to go away, so we can only hope the demographic *Sudeki* was focus-tested on enjoys the flesh spectacle. Characterisation aside, *Sudeki* is looking marvellous.

The game's opening location, a courtyard full of market stalls and bustling with activity, sets a confident tone for the adventure

The world is instantly likeable and coated with rich wine gum colours. The game's opening location, a castle's inner courtyard full of market stalls and bustling with activity, sets a confident tone for the adventure. It's a majestic scene: treetops wave in the breeze, shadows dapple the cobblestones and townspeople greet you as you wander past. The sense of scale is impressive as further exploration takes you onto the castle's crenellation or through mazy corridors. But this marzipan world does not stay safe for long. The first mission is to hunt down and kill a group of marauding creatures threatening the lives of villagers outside the confines of the castle. As a humble soldier, Tal, it's your task to take out as many as possible, but this also serves as a convenient combat tutorial.

It's here where *Sudeki* is likely to distinguish itself from nearly every other RPG. Project lead Tuomas Pirinen says he was keen to fuse elements of *Soul Calibur* with traditional RPG combat mechanics. The result is not as grand as Capcom meets *Final Fantasy*, but it's instantly rewarding and gratifying. As creatures lumber towards us the 'A' and the 'X' buttons deliver short, sharp attacks and the enemies recoil under the battering. The right trigger puts up a shield and even during these early bouts the fighting is simple and pleasing.

Unsurprisingly, combos help against the tougher opponents. The timing must be spot-on, but there's a combo gauge at the bottom left of the screen to help you judge this. The system works well against one or two opponents but is a little less workable when you're bullied by gangs of creatures.

This is where the special attacks come in. Each character can collect several of these and they can only be unleashed if enough spell points have been accumulated. They are varied, devastating and beautiful to behold, and also prove to be a neat introduction to the nuances of the realtime combat. In fact, realtime is a misnomer, because pressing 'Y' takes your chosen character into a menu where special attacks, items and AI states can be selected. Meanwhile, the action in-game slows to a crawl, with spell effects, creature movements and party tactics played out in a graceful pantomime.

It's an intelligent way to solve the problems of overly frenetic realtime combat and the clockwork drudgery of some turn-based systems. It's also necessary because once you have a full complement of four heroes on your team the action can become very complex. Though you are in direct control of one character, the others can be assigned AI states. These include missile attacks, defence, healing duties and magic attacks. Just how well the party dynamic works in practice, especially against



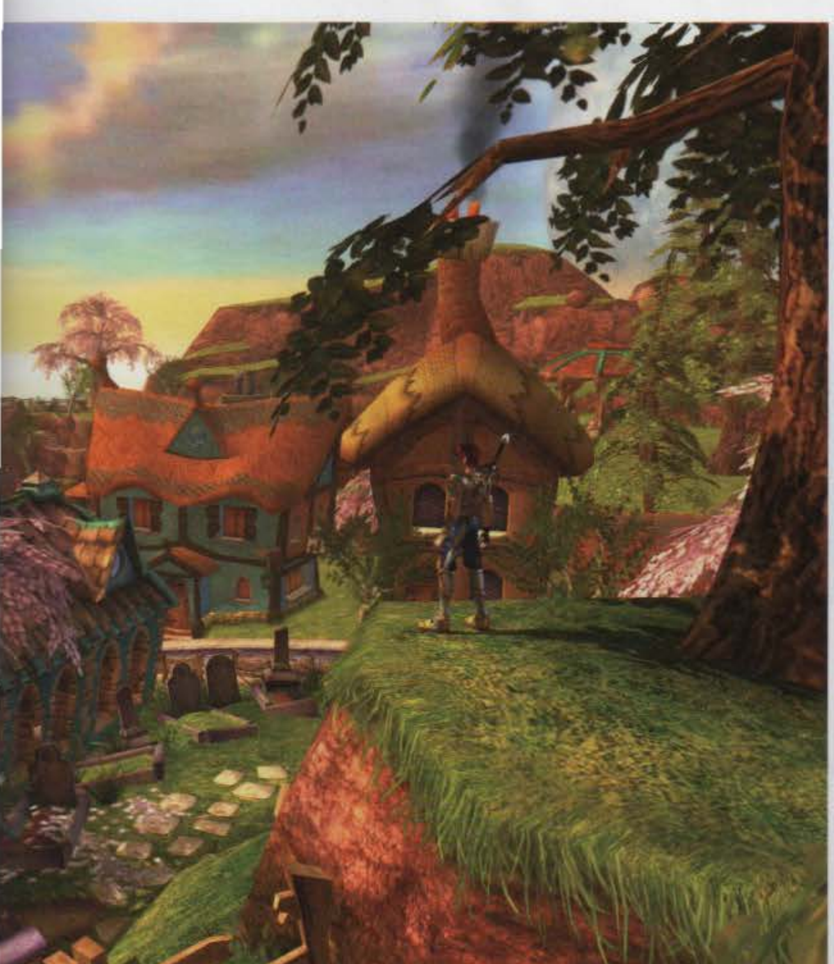
Every character gets their own set of devastating special attacks but these, as tradition decrees, must be used sparingly





Format: **Xbox**
Publisher: **Microsoft**
Developer: **Climax**
Origin: **UK**
Release: **May 2004**

Previously in **E**117, **E**118, **E**125



chambers full of creatures, remains to be seen. We are confident Climax can pull it all together. If there's one minor disappointment, it's that *Sudeki* dredges up a lot of traditional fantasy RPG motifs. It would be brutal to condemn a game for this alone, but it's hard not to glance cynically to the skies when you encounter another game with chests to plunder and urns to break. Surely these symbols have had their day?

Puzzles, too, are centred on character skills. One character can push blocks (sigh), another has a jetpack to cross chasms, one can dispel magical barriers or reveal invisible objects and another has claws enabling her to climb specific scenery. On paper, it sounds like the conundrums aren't going to provide many epiphanic moments, but the fact these skills can be combined could provide scope for creative puzzle setting. *Sudeki*'s greatest asset is simply that a passionate team has crafted it. There was never any strict deadline for the game – it's such a big RPG hope for Microsoft that the attitude was always 'it's finished when it's finished.' Thankfully, *Sudeki* has also undergone stringent testing, but not the kind conducted solely by obsessive bug hunters. It has gone through the Redmond testing department played by fresh-eyed volunteers, and Climax is confident everything from save point placement to combat/puzzle balance is now finely calibrated.

The developer reckons the adventure will take a bare minimum of 20 hours to complete, but promises side quests, secrets and mini-games for those who like big glossy game guides. It's certainly heartening to find a game so polished and exuberant, but the best thing about *Sudeki* is that it could conceivably be out by the end of May.



There are some 70 different kinds of creature populating the *Sudeki* universe, so variety is unlikely to be a problem. When we last visited Climax a sequel was already in the pipeline



The dark half

There are few plot details available but we do know that a parallel dark world exists in *Sudeki*. While the light/dark dichotomy is unlikely to offer the kind of intricacy found in *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* (the dark world can only be reached via portals discovered in the shadow world) it will throw up some interesting scenarios. Evil alter egos of the four main characters, for instance, are encountered in the dark world. Climax promises to subvert the traditional RPG good versus evil plot.

Onimusha 3: Demon Siege

Having finally gone hands-on with Capcom's third Onimusha outing, we can talk of a game that carries on the grand tradition with style





Takeshi Kaneshiro returns as Samanosuke, while Jean Reno plays Jacques Blanc. Although the characters are in different time zones, it is possible to teleport certain items from one to the other

You won't often find many gamers watching an intro sequence twice the first time a new game is loaded, but *Onimusha 3*'s opening sequence (the result of a collaboration between CG specialist Robot, Hong Kong action sequence king Donnie Yen, Japanese director Takashi Yamakazi and a significant amount of Capcom's cash) genuinely deserves a second viewing. The series' penchant for running at the front of the CG cinematic race is well documented, of course, and on the strength of its first sequence this latest instalment certainly won't be the one to drop the cut-scene baton.

The series' penchant for running at the front of the CG race is well documented, and this instalment won't be the one to drop the baton



The developer has had plenty of inspiration for locations in which to place the main protagonists, often with impressive results

At the beginning of this third PS2 *Onimusha*, we encounter Akechi Samanosuke, the samurai star of the first game, as he launches a solo attack on a Genma ship leading a considerable army to Honnoji Temple where Oda Nobunaga, previously defeated by *Onimusha 2*'s Yagyu Jubei, has re-emerged as the Genma King and is awaiting reinforcements. Instead, he gets a visit from an army-thrashing Samanosuke intent on permanently concluding Jubei's work.

However, before one of Nobunaga's finely rendered hairs is even touched, our samurai finds himself transported to present-day Paris. There, policeman Jacques Blanc, having barely survived a harsh introduction to the Genma hench-creatures that have descended on the French capital, has scarcely had time to acknowledge Samanosuke's arrival before he in turn is teleported to 16th century Japan.

The game is therefore spent controlling both characters in their respective adoptive locales, and those controls are probably the first difference *Onimusha* veterans will notice. No longer employing a mechanic borrowed from *Biohazard*, *Onimusha* has finally adopted a screen-relative system that clearly better suits the game's action-heavy style of play.

Dealing with enemies is now achieved in a more fluid manner, and this proves particularly apt as you often find yourself in circumstances where you're surrounded by foes. Besides, in terms of your actual surroundings, it makes navigation far easier, too.

The backgrounds are also now in 3D rather than prerendered, and although the camera angle is still specifically set to enhanc dramatic effect it often now tracks the protagonist, thus eliminating the type of potential frustration sometimes encountered in early *Biohazard* titles when trying to examine objects furthest from the camera.

Indeed, playing the Japanese version of *Onimusha 3* (see 'C'est moi, Jacques') has s far proved almost painless. The source of the chief irritation comes from the behaviour of helper characters (particularly Blanc's colleague and fiancé, Michele, who assists Samanosuke in his Parisian adventure), whose behaviour is disappointingly mechanical, and they appear remarkably kee to get in the way when environments become more confined. Still, it's a minor point.

As for the rest, there's the typical lack of radical change that we've come to expect from a Japanese sequel. The different types of soul orbs return for you to collect mid-battle, and the dynamic remains as

Format: **Playstation2**
Publisher: **Capcom**
Developer: **In-house (Production Studio 2)**
Origin: **Japan**
Release: **Out now (Japan) September (UK)**

Previously in **E**123, **E**125, **E**134













While combat is essentially tied to just one button, simple combos are still possible and rely mainly on assiduous timing. There is still no jump command

pleasing as it did in previous iterations, allowing you to replenish your health and magic gauges; exchanging the more common red orbs for weapon and armour upgrades continues to occur at the generously scattered save stations.

In addition, you continue to have the ability to transform into demon form once five purple orbs are obtained, giving you momentary invulnerability. It's a particularly useful skill during some of the more tenacious boss encounters.

And though the emphasis on action thankfully remains, the puzzle-solving element of the series is still here to provide the necessary level of balance, while the traditional to-and-fro nature of the genre continues to artificially increase playtime (and is tolerable in *Onimusha*'s case).

Initial play doesn't reveal any real surprises, then, nor for that matter any areas of major concern. Rather, it would appear this is a solidly crafted and systematically honed iteration for the popular series' last expected appearance on PlayStation2.

Nevertheless, final judgement is obviously reserved for the English-language version, due out in September.



C'est moi, Jacques

Gamers without access to player's guides will eventually find the Japanese release mostly unplayable, simply because several of the situations you find yourself in rely on more than tedious trial and error for success.

Our decision not to review this Japanese retail version therefore reflects these readers' position, but is ultimately based on the belief that the *Onimusha 3* experience will invariably be diminished for non-Japanese (and French) speakers due to the vast amounts of dialogue. (If you ever wondered, this is the same principle behind our decision to only review English-language versions of narrative-heavy titles such as *Zelda*.)

Red Ninja: End Of Honour

Format: **PS2, Xbox**
Publisher: **Vivendi Universal**
Developer: **Tranji**
Origin: **Japan**
Release: **Q4**

Trailing more deadly wire than our gaming room, this could be the best ninja game no one's heard of







An object lesson in the importance of timing in the ninja business, *Red Ninja* had the misfortune of debuting during the zenith of *Ninja Gaiden*'s pre-release hype. Despite being a quite obviously different animal to Tecmo's game, its failure to compete on a graphical level saw it dismissed out of hand by many gamers.

Though hardly a fair contest – *Red Ninja* was at that stage less than 40 per cent complete and *Gaiden* had the benefit of five years in production – it may never be a graphical showcase. Tranji's considerably more ambitious intention is to meld the two previously opposing camps of ninja game design – action and stealth – into a cohesive and unique experience.

Though the revenge-driven storyline is fairly conventional (its delivery, however, could be elevated by the involvement of 'The Princess Blade' director Shinsuke Sato), the game's major play mechanic is anything but. Antiheroine Kurenai wields the Tetsugen, a multipurpose wire weapon that serves as a combination of grappling hook, garrotte and harpoon. It can be wound around enemies and constricted to lop off limbs or sunder torsos. Once attached, a tension meter indicates the wire's increasing tautness, while Kurenai can continue to scythe it through other opponents, or loop it around overhanging scenery and lynch the original unfortunate target.





In addition to using the wire to zip-line around level architecture, Kurenai can hang in wait for a passing enemy and perform a vertical stealth kill

Stricken enemies will struggle to close in on Kurenai and keep the wire from tightening, and the protagonist's refreshing lack of traditional weaponry becomes much more of a liability in a straight fight. The scouts, archers and swordsmen will all react differently to a confrontation, requiring the player to prioritise attacks and choose advantageous environments for those times when an efficient surprise kill becomes impossible.

This emphasis on measured but visceral combat recalls *Mark Of Kri*, as do the pastel tones of the environments and the savagery of the bloodletting. But *Red Ninja* promises to be less forcibly linear, with intentionally confined, vertical levels encouraging the player to utilise Kurenai's athleticism and the unique properties of the Tetsugen. The game's success or failure will ultimately hinge on Tranji's ability to implement a control scheme that achieves movement and combat with graceful, predatory precision.

Red Ninja's first western showing at E3 should give an indication of whether it's a great game or just a great idea. Either way, its timing remains less than ideal: it will certainly be competing against K2's *Tenchu* side-story *Tenchu Kurenai*, and there'll be an unfortunate irony if Tomonobu Itagaki chooses E3 to finally unveil his *Kasumi-Den* project.



The now-obligatory wall-running requires the player to gauge angle and momentum, but it appears the steely hand of realism relaxes its grip once Kurenai gets going. She can also kick out from one surface to the next to gain altitude



Psi Ops

Format: **PS2, Xbox**
Publisher: **Midway**
Developer: **In-house**
Origin: **US**
Release: **Summer 2004**

Guns and ammo are all well and good, but what if you could use your mind as a weapon? That's the spin here

You are Nick Scryer, and Nick Scryer is a unique individual, to say the least. *Psi Ops* puts you in the army boots of a man with a mind of considerable power, set with the task of overthrowing The Movement, a shadowy international terrorist group with the usual sights set on the usual world domination.

We've all done that before. What we haven't done is had access to the range of powers Scryer can command, nor had access to the world in which to make use of them. Blessed with some impressive physics, almost everything in the world has mass and can be moved or destroyed. Fire spreads from object to object and those objects can be damaged just by smashing them together. It's not all just there for show, either.

What impresses at this stage is the freedom on offer to the player. Objectives are utterly simple, and even the most cursory glance at the levels presented so far will instantly start sparking off multiple ways of reaching a satisfactory conclusion. The physics defining the world of *Psi Ops*, alongside the carefully considered range of tools at Scryer's disposal, make taking on the levels a genuinely creative experience.

Your powers are initially limited, but will eventually grow to include telekinesis to move objects, pyrokinesis to set them alight and mind control to use the guards for your nefarious ends or for remote viewing. These skills can be combined as you see fit, meaning that you can lift a guard with telekinesis then set him on fire with pyrokinesis before throwing him at his fellows and setting them alight in the process. Shoot the door from a locker, stand on it and then use telekinesis to surf along, holding yourself aloft and shooting up the bad guys as you sail past. This combination of excellent physics and the tools with which to manipulate them leaves the player with little choice but to improvise in ever more imaginative ways.

While preview code consists of a handful of short levels, if the design is kept as open and the objectives as simple as those we've seen this should prove to be a special game, joining the slowly swelling ranks of titles giving players a toy box of gaming tools and just letting them play. We can only hope that the level design and objectives of the finished product are as intelligent and open as the game so clearly deserves.



That pyrokinesis in action. Scryer's talents must come in handy when he can't find his lighter











It's the way that Scryer's powers can be combined that really impresses. Crates, that symbol of videogame mediocrity, can here be set on fire and then flung into soldiers as a weapon. It's creative and highly satisfying

The Saga Of Ryzom



Format: **PC**
Publisher: **TBC**
Developer: **Nevrax**
Origin: **France**
Release: **Summer 2004**

Previously in **E**108, **E**127

For once, it really is a saga, some four years in the making and with eight years' worth of online gaming content planned







The local wildlife flocks and herds. Some are more aggressive at night, while others are more curious by day. It's worth learning all you can about them before embarking on a hunting trip







Experience points can be spent with trainers in villages who can teach you new spells, combat techniques or even tips for successful foraging

We don't want to trigger any traumatic Sunday School flashbacks, but *Ryzom*'s world – called Atys – is a little bit like an onion. The sky is dominated by gigantic roots that intertwine and thicken as game years pass. Eventually, they mat together to form a complete shell, plunging the world's old surface into darkness and forcing the population to climb up to the newly formed layer and rebuild their civilisation. Beneath the currently-occupied layer, the whole planet is constructed of a series of abandoned strata, nested inside each other like Russian dolls: dank and subterranean, overrun with whatever creatures have adapted to their hostile air.

It's a concept that shapes the commercial plan for *Ryzom* – as each new layer forms, it brings the possibility of a sequel or an add-on – but it's also a fascinating world on which to found a game. Its inhabitants, the Homins, are divided into four races, and choosing one will determine the area from which you start out. The geography of each differs, and weekly seasons will blanket the land in snowdrifts or cherry petals. These cycles, along with those of night and day, affect the natural resources available and the behaviour of Atys's wildlife. Pick your appearance and a job, and you emerge ready to start your quest for glory – since glory is what Nevrax believes will drive players through the game.



Ryzom's complex reputation system is what governs where you can travel to throughout Atys, and will affect the way NPCs relate to you. Gain enough glory and you'll attain Hero status, working your way into *Ryzom*'s history books and obtaining access to special, story based quests. The hope is that this complex development will ease the repetition and level caps that can sap players' enthusiasm for such open-ended games.

However, *Ryzom* is also built to encourage group play and co-ordination. Beyond the chores of day-to-day MMORPG life, gathering resources, visiting instructors to learn new skills and experimenting with the modular spell system, Atys is at constant risk from two natural disasters: the Kitins, an insectoid nightmare race who periodically invade from deep within the abandoned layers, and the Goo – yes, Goo – which spreads across the environment, corroding Atys's natural beauty and fertility. Only by joining ranks for mass battle can the Homins hope to preserve their paradise.

Nevrax isn't yet ready to announce a publisher, but is confident of a summer release. Anyone who shares the company's confidence can sign up for the beta online (www.ryzom.com).



Red Dead Revolver

Format: **PS2, Xbox**
Publisher: **Rockstar**
Developer: **Rockstar San Diego**
Origin: **US**
Release: **May**

Previously in **E**112, **E**121, **E**134

There's a stranger in town with a score to settle. Rockstar resurrects a long-lost cowboy caper









Kills earn you cash to spend on new weapons and so on, with higher premiums awarded for headshots. They also build up your specials bar. Red Harlow's special is the 'dead-eye aim', a slo-mo mode that allows you to empty a whole cylinder of bullets into your enemy without reply







Horse riding is a major feature of the game, providing welcome variety. Here, you're armed with Molotovs and required to raze a rival's property before galloping off into the sunset

Despite its incredible and as yet unexplored potential, there ain't much in the way of Wild West spirit around in the videogame trade nowadays. LucasArts' *Outlaws* gave some indication of what could be achieved with such a setting, but in 2004 fantasy and sci-fi riffs dominate.

So, bar the shoddy *Dead Man's Hand* (see p107), *Red Dead Revolver* is the lone ranger in its field right now. Rockstar might have expected some decent competition in a genre with such a rich cinematic history to draw from but, as the only gang in town, its San Diego studio has been able to indulge its wildest and westest fantasies.

Attentive readers will be aware of *Red Dead Revolver*'s disputed parentage. Back when Rockstar San Diego was still Angel Studios, the game was due to be published by Capcom but was shelved indefinitely following a disastrous showing at E3 2002. Rockstar spotted the game's potential and stepped into the breach, providing a more mature focus for the title, especially in terms of the storyline and an accompanying Morricone-esque soundtrack.

Thankfully, San Diego has also fixed the camera and control system since we last viewed the game two long years ago. In essence, this is a straightforward thirdperson shooter that lets the context do the hard work. Any fence that looks like you can vault, you can vault; any bale of straw that looks like a barrier you can crouch behind is a barrier you can crouch behind.

Red Dead Revolver is all about quick draws and sharp shooting. Discerning lock-on eradicates the ambiguities while a 'dead-eye aiming' feature – similar to *Max Payne*'s bullet time but harder to earn – promotes style over skill. It's not complex but, assuming those petty camera gripes don't recur, *Red Dead Revolver* should be thoroughly entertaining.

While main character Red Harlow's levels are of the classic lone gunslinger variety, the story lets you wear the chaps and spurs of five others. Playing as General Diego in the midst of a battle you're required to tackle enemy soldiers mano-a-mano while launching flares that reveal the position of their cannon emplacements.

Other levels take place on horseback or moving trains, in saloon bars or at the rodeo, and in every other gloriously clichéd spaghetti western scenario you can think of. Dare we suggest that a tense stand-off in the vein of Butch Cassidy or The Wild Bunch would make for a fitting finale?

The Suffering

Format: **PS2, Xbox**
Publisher: **Midway**
Developer: **Surreal Software**
Origin: **US**
Release: **May 14**

Previously in **E**125

After announcing its bold intention to dominate the mature market, Midway goes on an offence offensive



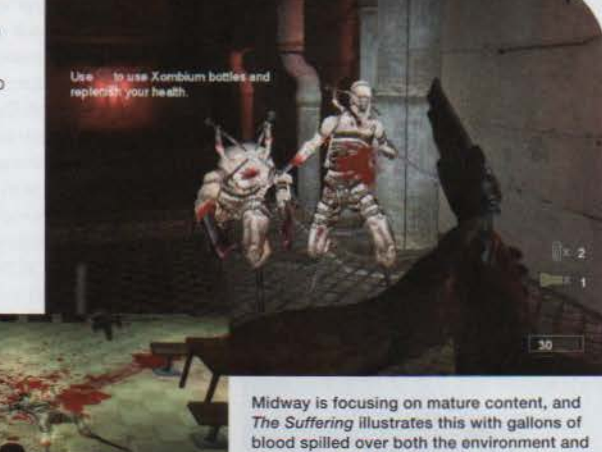


Your alternate form (above) allows you to unleash particularly violent attacks, but you're hardly a pushover in normal mode

The Suffering's hero, Torque, has both luxuriant sideburns and a troubled past. Arrested for the brutal murder of his wife and children, he has no memory of the event. It might be easier to believe in his innocence if exposure to craziness didn't turn him into a 12-foot blood-gargling gargoyle. Handy, though, when you're locked up in a prison overrun by ghouls with syringes for eyes.

It's not, however, a case of all schlock and no substance, as *The Suffering* shows its maturity in other ways. Throughout the game you can toggle between first- and thirdperson control, choosing whichever best suits your playing style and the environment you're in. The gruesome appearance of the enemies ties in to their attack behaviour, making massed battles a welcome change from the drip-drip scare tactics of the survival horror games that *The Suffering* superficially resembles.

Scripting and voice acting are well above the standard you might expect, and the sense of moral freedom is far more immediate than in more carefully calibrated universes such as *Deus Ex*'s. Shoot a friendly inmate full in the face, and your dead wife will whisper her appalled shock into your ear. It's an unexpectedly appealing re-invention of the scare 'em up: fear not fright, action not anticipation, strength not vulnerability.



Midway is focusing on mature content, and *The Suffering* illustrates this with gallons of blood spilled over both the environment and Torque himself. The game isn't as dumb as its appearance might suggest, however

Shadow Ops: Red Mercury

Format: **PC/Xbox**
Publisher: **Atari**
Developer: **Zombie Studios**
Origin: **US**
Release: **Summer**

Halo famously made this magazine swear. Zombie's game seems in rude health, too

Mark Long, the ex-army CEO of Zombie Studios, has a filthy mouth. "If we could ever capture the feeling of that movie," he says, introducing *Shadow Ops* as gaming's take on 'Black Hawk Down', "that would be the shit for me." Then, on the game's intro sequence, which thrusts the player straight into the action: "One thing I fucking hate is being told 'Right thumbstick to walk'." A hush descends across the theatre. And on the perils of being placed in hectic action straight from the off: "I'm gonna cheat, or I'll never fuckin' make it." He's got a point, albeit a rather colourful one. It does look awfully dangerous out there.

Shadow Ops is a firstperson shooter based on the *Unreal 2004* and Karma physics engines. If you close your eyes, you can probably imagine what it sounds like, orchestral scores and the rat-a-tat of bullets just missing your skull. There are 22 singleplayer missions, which take the player through a handful of the vogue war hotspots from the past decade, alongside ten co-op and ten multiplayer missions. We have some concerns about the AI – combat seems to depend less on *Halo* smarts and more on training your crosshair on a spot and waiting – but the game seems to be just as handsome and cinematic as the effusive Long wants it to be.



Long claims that Zombie reverse engineered the controls of *Halo*, although we don't know whether that's a figure of speech or a reference to actual code espionage





Like Bungie's shooter, the game will appear on Xbox and PC. The console version will offer both splitscreen and System Link options

Panic Maker

Format: **PlayStation2**
Publisher: **Capcom**
Developer: **Production Studio 4**
Origin: **Japan**
Release: **TBC**

And now, from the creators of Biohazard and Devil May Cry, it's time for something completely different…



Coco Town's environments seem to provide a mix of wide streets, tight alleys and secluded areas for 'wackiness' to inevitably ensue

In a recent interview on prospects for 2004, Capcom MD Haruhiro Tsujimoto promised some 'surprising titles', and *Panic Maker* is certainly one of them. Its skewed cel-shaded design is *Viewtiful Joe* does *Jet Set Radio*; the high concept is *State Of Emergency* with random wackiness replacing random violence.

The player controls Cozumi, a young alien out to inflict practical jokes on the population of Coco Town. Cozumi can mimic the appearance of human characters, which allows him to travel unnoticed and grants him access to the cloned character's abilities.

These abilities are used to play practical jokes, ranging from off-key karaoke to bodily functions to 'dangerous' stunts (apparently involving plenty of explosives). In the aftermath of a joke, the victims are briefly stunned and shed red rings, the collectable item du jour. These must be harvested before the crowd recovers, at which point they will pursue Cozumi, who must quickly assume a new identity to escape the mob's wrath.

Further complications ensue with the addition of other aliens out to steal Cozumi's rings or expose him to the baying crowds, and this dynamic also forms the basis of the twoplayer mode. It remains unclear if western audiences will get the joke, or indeed a release.



Streaking, breaking wind and even a spot of good-humoured electrocution – the system encourages cascading combinations of pranks to maximise scoring (above). The multiplayer screen (left) shows Cozumi and a female competitor in their true forms

Ape Escape Mega Stadium

Format: **PlayStation2**
Publisher: **SCEI**
Developer: **In-house**
Origin: **Japan**
Release: **TBC**

Mario Party for PS2? Well, not really. But multiplayer monkey business is assured

The latest outing for SCEI's mascot franchise has left the core character designs and dual-analogue mechanic untouched, focusing instead on an inevitable (but eye-catchingly sharp and fitting) cel-shaded makeover and a more surprising genre shift.

Mega Stadium appears to be an amalgam of Nintendo and Capcom multiplayer sensibilities, alternating themed arena free-for-alls with specialised stages. One such stage sees players rafting down a river, with both sticks assigned to furiously thrashing the oars.

A cast of 11 – each with unique weapons and abilities, of course – and the prospect of more to be unlocked should provide enough variety for all tastes, and a lengthy list of medals, power-ups and secrets (delivered via letters, postcards or mobile phone messages from approving simians) rewards obsessive replay.

With support for up to four players, SCEI has fastidiously ticked all the boxes for multiplayer success: a presumably singleplayer Story mode is also included for those who would prefer to be alone with the monkeys. As with any party game, the test will be in the playing rather than the list of features – although there seems no reason for *Ape Escape* fans not to remain enthusiastic. Cross your fingers for Monkey Soccer's return, just to be sure.



Satisfyingly cartoonish gadgets, bright primary colours and repeatedly striking monkeys with batons remain the order of the day, but now there is scope for infighting among both sides





Though the rafting sections require both sticks for movement, overriding the standard move-and-fight setup, rest assured that the shoulder buttons are used to launch torpedoes

Prescreen Alphas This month's announcements and updates...

Ace Combat 5

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Namco
Developer: In-house





Fifth iteration of a rare credible flight sim – sorry, air combat – series on consoles. Diehards will be wowed by the detail of over 50 licensed aircraft, but don't hold out for anything revolutionary.

Vib Ripple

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: SCEI
Developer: NanaOn-Sha





The welcome return of Masaya Matsuura's line-drawn bunny. Jumping around photo-mapped levels reveals bonuses and booby traps as relayed by vibrations of the DualShock pad.

Tribes Vengeance

Format: PC
Publisher: Sierra
Developer: Irrational





The creator of *System Shock 2* has been recruited to add a substantial singleplayer mode to *Tribes'* traditional multiplayer action. Expect a plot that shifts between multiple time periods.

Sly Raccoon 2: Band Of Thieves

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: SCEE
Developer: Sucker Punch





This underrated platformer – known as *Sly Cooper* in the States – always deserved a second outing. The abandonment of linear structures could ensure an older audience this time out.

Pocket Kingdoms

Format: N-Gage
Publisher: Nokia
Developer: Sega





Subtitled *Own The World* and touted as the world's first global massively multiplayer mobile game, this potentially groundbreaking title could significantly raise N-Gage's middling reputation.

Pariah

Format: Xbox, PC
Publisher: Hip Interactive/Groove Games
Developer: Digital Extremes





This firstperson actioner from the team (and the engine) behind *UT 2004* has been in development for two years, and it's looking like a supremely ambitious endeavour. Expect more on it soon.

KOF: Maximum Impact

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: SNK
Developer: In-house





Is the first 3D *King Of Fighters* game a necessary leap forward for the ailing series, sacrilege on a grand scale, or could it be just an excuse to render Lian with more believable breasts?

Leisure Suit Larry Magna Cum Laude

Format: PC, PS2, Xbox
Publisher: Vivendi
Developer: High Voltage





Is that an intentional pun in the title? With conversations conducted by steering sperm through a maze, we can't be sure. At least US college jocks will welcome the series' return.



Final Fantasy XI

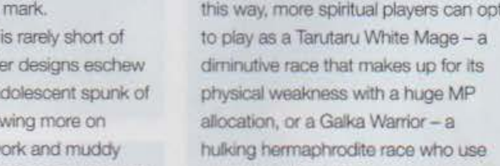
The thought of taking FF XI online in Europe is enough to get many PS2 owners salivating openly. With more than a million characters and looks that still impress after two years, it's time for us to pay another visit to Vana'diel

Regular readers of **Edge** will remember a certain columnist who found both his life and his writing invaded by the charms of a particular MMORPG. At the time, Lupin Kojima's obsession was greeted with a certain justified scepticism. Would the words '*Final Fantasy*', 'online' and – whisper it – 'PlayStation2' ever come together outside of Japan? Now, as *Final Fantasy XI* finally jumps the Pacific on to American PS2s, it could be time to dig out those back issues.

In May, it will be two long years since *Final Fantasy XI* was launched on Japanese PS2s. Since then the PC iteration has appeared, first in Japan and then, last year, in the US, allowing thousands of North American PC owners to begin mixing it with the experienced Vana'diel locals. There's no division between the groups, however. An in-game text translator function allows communication between US and Japanese players, and the game is platform agnostic – there's no way to tell a PC player from a PS2 one.

And the game has proved wildly popular with both sets of users, with Square-Enix recently announcing that the total number of active characters across North America and Japan had broken the million mark.

Visually, *FF XI* is rarely short of beautiful. Character designs eschew the buckles and adolescent spunk of *FF X* and *X-2*, drawing more on medieval leatherwork and muddy realism. Slabs of soft armour interlock over fitted jerkins, and female characters sport leather trousers cut


- Format: **PlayStation2/PC**
- Publisher: **SCEA**
- Developer: **Square-Enix**
- Origin: **Japan**
- Release: **Out now (US, Japan) TBC (UK)**


It's not all about the levelling – sitting and chatting is also a good way to obtain information and techniques. Here a high-level Tarutaru ninja (left) shares his knowledge round a cosy fire

at the thigh that are a recognisable evolution from the hosiery of *Final Fantasy Tactics*.

Your character's skills also flow from this direction. Individual abilities and statistics are decided by a job system – fans of *Final Fantasy V* and *Tactics* will instantly recognise the roles of Monk, Thief, Warrior and Red, White and Black Mages – with a choice of five races adding more character depth and development. In this way, more spiritual players can opt to play as a Tarutaru White Mage – a diminutive race that makes up for its physical weakness with a huge MP allocation, or a Galka Warrior – a hulking hermaphrodite race who use their strength well but are weaker as magic users.

Jobs can be swapped at will so long as you are in a main city, of which there are four. Each is home to a private 'Mog House' where your personal Moogle will attend to such tasks as storage and delivery of items, job and equipment changes, as well as gardening and feng-shui. In




***FFXI*'s environments are visually striking, and never fail to impress, whether you're Quadav-spotting in Rolanberry Fields (top) or healing in West Ronfaure (above)**



addition, the *Rise of the Zilart* expansion pack, now bundled with the game, brings with it six new areas to explore and opens up the more advanced roles of Samurai, Ninja and Dragoon, bringing the total to nine, for players as they reach level 30 – enough to keep most players busy for years to come.

Every area is populated with a varied and exquisitely modelled bestiary – redesigned *Final Fantasy* stalwarts such as goblins and orcs rub shoulders with giant giraffes, pink birds and evil, evil rabbits. The grind of random battles has no place in this online paradise – creatures are always visible, freely wandering across the landscape. These monsters, or 'mobs', are either 'aggro' or not – a player running past the line of sight of an aggro mob will be targeted by it and have their day violently ruined. Mobs also become aggro based on sound, smell and mysterious mob whims – certain types of bat, for example, will attack anyone healing in their vicinity. Many of the distinctive features of *Final Fantasy XI* are a result of this aggro system – once targeted, a player can only hope that their attacker is weak, or that they will be able to 'zone' – run for the exit of the area they are in.

Fleeing a pursuing mob through an area populated with enemies is of course not without its consequences, and the sight of a hapless player dragging a 'train' of five or six goblins is a common one.

The party system, however, is the real lynchpin of all the social interaction. For the first few levels a player can 'solo' quite easily, going one-on-one with the easier monsters. New players will notice that the familiar turn-based system of fighting has been abandoned in favour of a more immediate system. Players lock on to their target and select attack to initiate a fight: melee attacks proceed automatically. Magic attacks, weapon skills (think rapid turnover Limit Breaks) and other job-specific skills must all be initiated via menu systems while the fight continues.

Defeat your enemy and you receive experience points, contributing







Busy areas such as San d'Oria boast a wide range of interesting and talkative NPCs, many with specific quests to impart (main), while Jueno (top right) is the place to gawp at higher level characters. Meanwhile, members of the Albion linkshell politely pose for our camera (above right)



The auction houses of major cities are the prime locations for buying and selling. Characters sporting a purse icon are running bazaars to turn a profit, often sitting in their underwear to free up valuable inventory space for stock







towards your next level gain. The wide spacing of player levels (the current cap is 75, still a distant dream to players playing on the North American PC version) and the use of the classic *Final Fantasy* fanfare as you level up make it a real event, with other players often congratulating you with a typed 'gratz' or '/cheer' as they run past.

However, solo play is only feasible, and indeed pleasurable, until around level 12. At this point even easy monsters become more of a challenge, and the quirks of each job class begin to manifest themselves.

White Mages will find their healing magic no match for the hit strength of enemies, and warriors will spend long downtimes healing (players can kneel to slowly rebuild HP) between monsters. Pair the two classes in one party, though, and you suddenly have both bases covered.

Now add a Red Mage to cast debuffs – Slow, Poison, Bind – and a Monk to increase your melee strength and your party is really starting to come together. Maybe add a Black Mage to nuke from the back and a Thief to increase your chance of finding good items, and it's time to settle down for a few hours of exhilarating full-team gaming.

That Square-Enix has placed such emphasis on the social aspects of *Final Fantasy XI* is the key to its strength. To play well you must play well with other people, and a party can fail due to one player's failings or soar thanks to a good leader.

And as a result, *Final Fantasy XI* is an exceedingly courteous and altruistic place to play – there is no player vs player, no muggings, and no con artists. Players low on HP will often find themselves healed by passing Mages for no other reason than to be helpful, and White Mages with 'Raise' will routinely travel for 15 minutes to bring a player they have never seen before back to life. High-level players will entertain others with tales of how they got their amazing hat and level-one noobs can often pick up free swords or armour if they ask nicely enough.

Sony still hasn't confirmed PAL releases for either format, but the PC version at least should be a fairly straightforward undertaking. European gamers have already waited long enough, and elsewhere in the world *FF XI* has been inducing inappropriate somnolence in impressionable journalists for nearly two years. Perhaps now isn't too soon to start checking out how comfortable it is under your desk.



Taxing imports

European players wishing to get online with their PS2s will face a set of hurdles familiar to most import *Phantasy Star Online* veterans. The PS2 internal hard drive launched in the US in March, and comes with *Final Fantasy XI* and the *Rise Of The Zilart* expansion pre-installed and included in the price of $100 – plus a $12.95 per month subscription. The results of combining a chipped PlayStation2, network adapter and HDD are untested, but European players participating in beta tests on NTSC PS2s report few problems.



Thief: Deadly Shadows

Fashionably late but still dressed to kill, master sneaker Garrett returns to provide closure for fans and hopefully win some new friends in the process

"Oh dear god, if the game is anything like deus ex: invisible war, you're all dead." Hell hath no lower case like a gamer scorned, and the single line of text on fan-registered site www.thief3.org indicates the weight of expectation – and trepidation – Ion Storm Austin is performing under. Pendulous swings of opinion have accompanied every detail of *Deadly Shadows'* development, even before the *Invisible War* backlash began.

"Because of some of our more radical decisions, I'm sure there will be hardcore fans who will never be satisfied with the game," admits project director **Randy Smith**.

"I think the vast majority of former *Thief* fans will be very pleased that the core appeal and gameplay have not been compromised. That's not to understate how much attention we've paid to increasing the appeal of the game for new players."

His faith may not be misplaced. Even the incomplete build, played in less than ideal conditions and running without the benefit of a full sound treatment, has *Thief's* unmistakably suffocating atmosphere. The series' collision of medieval, industrial and magical themes remains intact and wilfully unexplained. A subdued colour scheme informs the environments – indoors, warm yellow firelight fades to sepia tones, and moonlight streams through the windows icy blue. Out in the squalor of the nameless city, the streetlamps' wan grey is broken by the gold glow from shuttered windows.

Of course, it's the use of shadows that defines the game, and the new per-pixel effects are striking, both visually and in terms of their impact on gameplay. Once reliable, darkness is now fleeting and easily disturbed by a patrolling guard's torch or a door opening from a well-lit area. An unexpected resident's shadow looming in the doorway you were about to enter triggers a thrill of panic and, by degrees, Garrett's own shadow feels painfully exposed as it slips along the walls and floors.

Though a huge development for the series, it may be less impressive to a post-*Splinter Cell* audience. *Deadly Shadows* also lacks the theatrical splendour of the latter's lighting effects. Smith stresses that it had no direct influence on development: "We definitely evaluate other games to understand their successes and failures, and in the specific case of *Splinter Cell* we found that we were heading in some of the same directions already."

The most controversial of these directions has been the implementation of a thirdperson camera. Smith recalls: "We considered some crazy designs that would attempt to preserve *Thief's* aesthetic,

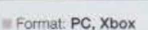


A fringe benefit of the thirdperson camera is the ability to admire Garrett's striking in-game model. Note his artificial eye, which provides a hazy telescopic lens view





The unique cut-scenes return, courtesy of US animation studio Rustmonkey



- Format: **PC, Xbox**
- Publisher: **Eidos**
- Developer: **Ion Storm Austin**
- Origin: **US**
- Release: **TBC**













Garrett retains the blackjack and most arrow types from previous games, but a dagger has replaced the longsword – making a fair fight even less desirable



One last heist

Edge quizzes *Thief: DS* director Randy Smith.

How different is the game's current incarnation from what was originally planned for *Thief 3*?
We started designing *Thief 3* (as it was called then) at Looking Glass early in 2000. Back then, Terri Brosius and myself were the co-lead designers and pretty much the only people assigned to the project full time. The original design was a clear extrapolation of our company's goals for the first two *Thief* games, and to the extent we had details in that plan, pretty much all of it survived and still exists in *Thief: Deadly Shadows* today. Since then, Looking Glass folded, *Thief 3* moved to Ion Storm and Terri and I got hired to be lead writer and project director, respectively. Overall, the core spirit of the project follows the legacy started at Looking Glass.

Would you agree that the series' intelligent dark fantasy theme and ambiguous narrative have hindered wider commercial acceptance?
Yeah, I would have to agree with that. For better and worse, the game's atmosphere and narrative are considerably more sophisticated than a more standard videogame plot. *Thief* is morally ambiguous – there are no clear heroes and villains. The static story elements are much more focused on dialogue and developments than on action, because we prefer to let the player use the emergent narrative in gameplay to tell the action part of the story themselves. I'm sure marketing would rather we had used a more bite-sized, digestible and sellable plot, but I also think that, for players who enjoy slightly deeper narratives in their games, this one will provide a lot of appeal and involvement without forcing them to work hard to understand the overall story.

Is there potential for the original games to be rebuilt with the *T:DS* technology and re-released, or do you see that as a project for the mod community rather than Ion Storm?
I doubt it would have a lot of mileage with the powers that be. With some justification, too: there's enough fresh ideas and creative energy in the world to continue making forward progress. Why backtrack purely for the sake of technological evolution when you can make an amazing new thing in a similar creative space? The past served us well – let's let it be.

As for the mod community, I'm personally inspired by their dedication to crazy new ideas and experiments that we could never ship in a commercial project. I would be honoured to see the previous games upgraded with modern technology, but I would just as soon see them pour their creative energy into new, risky ideas. That's a pretty similar response I've had to developers working on remakes... I guess I'm just more interested in seeing new creative works than rehashes of older works.

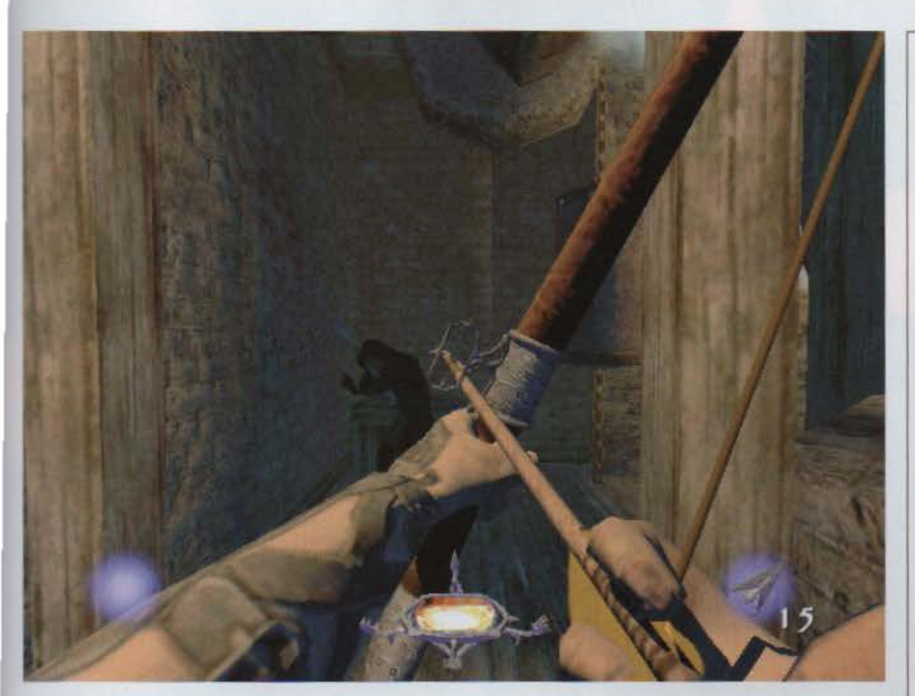
Are the Looking Glass alumni working outside of Ion Storm still keeping up with the game's progress? Is there a sense of it being a Looking Glass legacy?
Well, the other ex-LG'ers are still in touch with me and their other former co-workers at Ion. Many of them have visited the studio and taken the time to review our work and provide excellent feedback, for which we are extremely grateful. Tim Stellmach, the original lead designer, is a constant source of valuable input. Doug Church has visited to help us out of ugly development spots from time to time. Greg LoPiccolo – the original project director – and Josh Randall – the original associate producer – are now at Harmonix Music, and those guys are really anticipating the new *Thief* and are a constant source of support and inspiration. Laura Baldwin, one of *Thief*'s original writers, has actually done a ton of contract writing for *T:DS*. So, yeah, the Looking Glass alumni still have their fingerprints all over the game.

I should qualify that statement to say that the vast majority of the creative effort came from the Ion Austin team, many of whom never had anything to do with the first two games, other than being fans.

You've been involved with the *Thief* cycle for six years now – has it been a happy relationship?
Absolutely, it's been a major part of my life, the vast majority of my career, and a set of accomplishments that I'm very proud to have participated in. I really love the *Thief* series and think that it has a lot to offer the world of gaming. It's been a privilege to work on these games with all their risky high concepts, advanced designs, arty presentation, and deep narratives; that's a rare opportunity in the profit-driven games industry.

Furthermore, I've benefited from learning from and working with some amazing people on three different teams at two different studios. There have certainly been some ups and downs, conflicts, unhappiness, development tribulations, missed opportunities, failed goals, and all of that as well, but overall it was worth it.

I'm happy to say that this will be the last *Thief* game I ever ship – the series will pass into other hands after this, and I'm confident that it will take off in new and exciting directions. I've been there to help see the series through the trilogy, as it was originally conceived at Looking Glass, and now I feel I've done my part and am ready to move on to new things.



Archery flicks to firstperson regardless of camera, and uses the Xbox triggers to satisfying effect: squeeze to notch an arrow, then release. Lockpicking is similarly tactile, using a system similar to that in *Splinter Cell*

Bright lights, big city

Thief's metropolis plays a central role, serving as a link between missions and a hunting ground for players. Valuables from houses, apartments and stalls can be fenced and used to purchase equipment, but overzealous ransacking of an area will heighten security and AI paranoia. "The city has been in development since the Looking Glass days. I'd say it's midway between the interactive, living city in *GTAIII* and the more structured and directed world in a game like *Zelda*," explains Smith.



such as the thirdperson camera refusing to move to a location where it would show you something you couldn't also see in firstperson, but ultimately we realised that we couldn't pull them off without undermining all the positive qualities the view brings to the *Thief* gameplay."

And *Thief* in thirdperson is a revelation. Feeling traditionalist, we switched to firstperson immediately (the default Xbox view is thirdperson; on PC it will be firstperson), but were quickly seduced back by how confidently both perspectives are supported during play. Thirdperson benefits from Garrett remaining an enormously compelling character, and to see the master thief at work – from crouch to catlike prowl to warily confident stride – adds weight to the game, rather than diffusing its immediacy. Compared to how haltingly firstperson views have been introduced into thirdperson stealth games, *Deadly Shadows* is surprisingly assured with the reverse.

Any advantage the remote view affords looks to be a small mercy when facing the overhauled AI. Though still endearingly uncertain when faced with a thief in their midst, inhabitants are considerably more aware of their environment. An open door, doused torch or missing valuables (especially if said valuables were contained in the purse on their belt) will spur guards to search the area or non-combatants to rush off and return with the guards in tow. Characters stroll, hunt and give chase with expressive animation, and *Invisible War*'s ragdoll physics ensure bludgeoned guards can be arranged in compromising positions, as is *Thief* player tradition.

Thirdperson benefits from Garrett remaining a compelling character, and to see the master thief at work – from catlike prowl to warily confident stride – adds weight to the game

Would-be pacifists will be catered for with a custom difficulty setting, allowing self-imposed limitations on how often they can waylay, and extreme stealth players can even punish themselves for being detected.

It's easy to be excited by the promise of *Deadly Shadows*, and more difficult to guess how close it is to fulfilling that promise. There's still much to be done: not least implementing the near-subliminal foreboding of the soundtrack, and the narrative that will weave the game's elements together, hopefully achieving the pay-off fans have been waiting for since *The Metal Age*'s cliffhanger. However, with Ion Storm Austin's full staff dedicated to the project and determined to learn from the mistakes in their previous title, the death threats may be a little premature. "Really this is *Thief++*, a massive upgrade to graphics and feature set, not a completely reconceived game," Smith maintains. What's especially thrilling is that *Deadly Shadows* looks to be as fresh and important now as *Thief* was in 1998.







Uncharitable gamers may find the wall-hugging move a little *Medieval Gear Solid*, but it proves useful for ensuring patrolling guards do not blunder into Garrett in tight corridors



The art of war

In which we attend a three-game LucasArts launch at a cinema just off Leicester Square, and find someone a little short for a...

Each year, Activision holds a conference entitled Activ8 in order to promote its product line up. The event consists of two days of PR budget-fuelled yet tightly reined debauchery, cocktails, polite nods and handshakes. Today we are faced with what you might call Activ7, just an afternoon in the company of LucasArts, but the essence of the jolly is three new war-themed games, some carefully crafted presentations and enough insincerity to drown a battalion of Stormtroopers.

Two of them are stationed outside the Prince Charles cinema as we arrive, like some kind of Imperial taskmasters asking journalists for names and checking them off a tightly martialled list. It's a nice touch, although the troopers aren't exactly of military build. In fact, we turn to one of them: "You're a little short for a..." but trail off. They've heard it all before, of course. Poor things. How can you see the weariness of someone's eyes through opaque glazed black plastic? "You don't need to see my identification," giggles the next journalist in the queue. Poor things, poor things.

Inside the cinema reception, we find name badges and head downstairs. All bags must be checked. "It's basically so if there's a bomb, it blows us up rather than you," jokes Activision PR manager **Tim Pointing**. We suspect it has more to do with confiscating surreptitious recording equipment, which is forbidden in large, trooper-enforced capital letters. Crack PR like this requires watertight image releasing. No leaks.

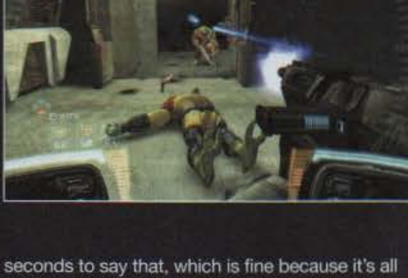
The tiny, cramped downstairs lobby of the Prince Charles houses eight PlayStation2 pods and maybe 40 journalists from across Europe. On the each of the pods is *Star Wars Battlefront*, Pandemic's multiformat 'Star Wars' take on the *Battlefield 1942* model. The doors of the pods hang open, the PS2 drives sealed for security. Ponting twists through the melee from pod to pod, hitting reset buttons to sync another multiplayer game. We settle down to watch the thing in action.

And it looks dreadful. So bad that, initially, we don't even recognise it as the game hyped as The One Thing I Want This Year by so many 'Star

Firstperson shooter *Republic Commando* is LucasArts' great hope for bringing the 'Episode III' universe to a videogame. The commandos' T-shaped visor makes for a distinctive look for the player's view of the 'Dark and Gritty' action







Wars' fans. It is only after some time that we realise the green avatar bounding from one sand hut to the next is a rebel trooper, and that the sand huts are part of Tattooine. The game continues, and it seems more reminiscent of LucasArts' deathly nadir, vehicle combat thriller *Star Wars: Demolition*. Characters rush around and shoot each other, lasers impact with no impact, and player characters fall over and then respawn and shoot each other again. It's uninspiring stuff.

A number of resets later and the crowd is funnelled upstairs, towards the cinema's circle for the day's presentations. The master of ceremonies welcomes everyone to the country, capital, cinema, and then talks them through the itinerary. She doesn't tell anyone to switch off their mobile, which means that we'll spend the next two hours learning that the ringtones of European journalists are no less annoying than their British counterparts. Regardless, today we will see *Mercenaries*, a thirdperson military adventure; *Republic Commando*, a firstperson shooter set in the 'Star Wars: Episode III' era, and first, as luck would have it, *Star Wars Battlefront*. If you missed **E**134's preview, let's go over a few details.

Scheduled for release on the same day as the original trilogy DVD boxed set – a marketing coup presumably orchestrated a long time a go, in a galaxy far, far... etc – *Battlefront* is a team combat game which promises to let players fight all the major battles they've seen in the 'Star Wars' films. The game's Lucasfilm-created trailer takes 40 seconds to say that, which is fine because it's all that most people need telling. Combat is thirdperson, and either on foot or in many of the series' iconic vehicles, from X-Wings to land speeders, AT-ATs to AT-STs. And all the later Lucas content, too, because this is a pan-temporal game, taking in both trilogies.

There are four playable teams in *Battlefront*, paired up to match the fiction's historical canon. Rebels fight Imperials, and Separatists fight the Republic. Each of the four teams is made up from six distinct fighters. Distinct is a world often abused in videogames, but *Battlefront*'s characters do seem to exhibit differences above and beyond their neat polygonal meshes and hi-res texturing. As well as the usual base attributes (strength, speed, type and range of weaponry, and so on) each has a number of job-appropriate special abilities. The Bothan spy can disguise itself as a part of the enemy force, appearing as a Stormtrooper to all but the Imperial Commander, who can also call down air strikes from the Star Destroyers that orbit high above the planets. The rebel pilot is the only character who can eject from vehicles when they crash and burn.

Battles take place across 16 maps and ten planets, a couple of which are unique to each era (it's impossible, for example, to fight an 'Episode 1-3'-style battle on Hoth or Endor). Some of them appear open and interesting, tailored to a dynamic which employs close combat on large-scale maps. Others, like the sand-bunker city on Tattoine that we meandered through earlier, look less suited to the game's form, although impressions can be misleading. It'll always be difficult to grasp the subtleties of something that offers this much potential for depth in a handful of minutes, but this is supposed to be 'Star Wars' as *Battlefield 1942*, and it doesn't yet seem to deliver on that promise.

However, even if we decide that the map we saw downstairs is an awful level, watching a LucasArts employee play through other environments on a big screen and extruding the possibilities for home multiplayer havoc is a pleasure. And, just as a choreographed showreel



Mercenaries uses a system similar to *Grand Theft Auto*, as your actions for one faction may affect your dealings with another. The destruction of vehicles and buildings is promised, along with air strikes and emphasised physics and explosion effects

There is something about the powder-blue universe that recalls both Metroid Prime and Halo, along with pace and solidity that bring back happy memories



Star Wars Battlefront in action. We can see the original trilogy's battles being far more popular than those from the prequels, with a bias toward the Rebels. Agreed?

of game highlights in an air-conditioned cinema will generally give a positive impression of a company's major title, so a game will always struggle to reveal its charms on soundless pods in cramped, stuffy conditions.

The second game to be demoed is Xbox/PC shooter *Republic Commando*, and the producer has a keyword agenda from the start. *Republic Commando*, he explains, is Dark and Gritty. He hammers this home time and time again, like it's something revolutionary. We suppose it is revolutionary insofar as the 'Star Wars' universe is concerned, or at least a diversion from the candy-coated heroism that normally pervades LucasArts' games. While Dark and Gritty differentiates *Commando* from its labelmates, it brings it closer to the slew of unlicensed firstperson shooters that shoot for the teen-angst market every year.

Thankfully, licences drive sales. Quality often matters less, which isn't to say *Republic Commando* doesn't seem to have that in abundance. It is a pretty, pretty game, built around the *UT2003* engine, and aesthetically helped by some neat spot effects thrown onto the scenery by the excellent helmet-based head-up display. "It looks like *Metroid Prime* meets *Halo*," whispers one eager journo, enthusiasm dancing like fire, writing box-quotes across his quickly smitten eyes. Our own tinder isn't quite that easily sparked, but there is something about the powder-blue-shadowed universe that recalls both games, along with a sense of pace and solidity that brings back happy memories too. Weapons click and clunk with satisfaction, droids whirr, fizz, lock, target and destroy. Nice.

Nicer still is the way the player interacts with

his team. *Republic Commando* is a squad-based FPS, meaning that progress relies on directing (and looking after) your teammates as much as it does on the player's reaction. Looking at certain places in each location brings up context-sensitive orders – the team can be told to advance to a corner, snipers can be told to get in position, and so on. The producer points out that the options give players different ways of tackling each situation, offering plenty of replay value.

We point out that there's only plenty of replay value in tackling a game's situations if they are are fun in the first place. Get that right, though – which means AI smoke and mirrors along the lines of *Halo*, rather than the unreal *Unreal*-style twitch-left-and-right combat that, say, *Jedi Knight* specialised in – and *Republic Commando* could prove as enticing as a blending of *Halo* and *Metroid Prime* sounds. Dark and Gritty? That's just another way of saying the lead artist owns a copy of 'Jacob's Ladder', isn't it? Whatever the truth here, it's a pretty facile hook, but the 'Episode III' tie-in means it's guaranteed to attract public and critical attention anyway, and there's every chance it could deserve both.

Mercenaries is today's very special surprise. It is a world exclusive – coming on Xbox and PS2, well into development, unannounced, unseen, and unattached to a 'Star Wars' licence. It is about now that the whispering starts from the men dressed as Imperials standing behind us. It turns out the troopers' real purpose is somewhat more sinister than just decorative; it's to police the theatre for rogue, rulebreaking writers, and a journalist has been spotted taking a picture on his mobile. One of Activision's PRs clambers in an ungainly fashion to the row behind the felon… then climbs back again. "It's OK," she whispers loudly. "He's just texting." The troopers grumble. "He's just texting!" she reaffirms.

On with the show.

Show is probably the right word. "So!" says the producer, "I'm here to show you *Sam & Max*." Cue momentary gasps from parts of the audience. "Oh, wait. What?" He mimes receiving instructions from offstage. "Oh, right… Well, I guess I'll have to

Sony has called Mercenaries one of the most attractive games it's seen in development for PlayStation2, and we have no trouble believing this







Star Wars Battlefront keeps the prequel IP away from the original trilogy, so this 'Episode II' droid is unlikely to be menaced by a fleet of AT-ATs or a pack of Ewoks. While this keeps the battles in context, the 'what if' value will attract modders on PC

show you *Mercenaries* instead, then." He has plenty to be pleased about, however. He says Sony has called *Mercenaries* one of the most attractive games it's seen in development for PlayStation2, and we have no trouble believing him. It is easiest to describe the game as a military *Grand Theft Auto*, which was presumably the pitch, a clever shot at a vogue genre.

The player takes the role of a mercenary fighting for cash in a chaotic coup-wrecked North Korea, trying to track down a deck of cards' worth of evildoers. Make money, and buy cool stuff. Buy cool stuff, and use it to kill people. Kill people, and make money. The circle of life.

On the periphery of the circle, the UN, the Chinese and the Russian Mafia all aim to craft the war torn country to their own agendas, and staying on the right side of each is advisable (but not always possible). Like rival gangs in *Grand Theft Auto*, performing a task for one may irritate the others enough to put a bounty on your head. Every action – be it stealing food from somewhere and selling it on, assassinating a key gang member, or calling in an air strike and levelling a building – has a physical, economic, and political impact on the world.

Perhaps more impressive than the game's superficial beauty and its interwoven chaos theory intelligence is its heart, the physics system, powered by Havok. At one stage the demo guy uses the game's debug mode to drop five SUVs on top of each other, watches them tumble around for a few moments, then blows them up with a rocket launcher. Another moment sees him scatter crates with an explosion at a checkpoint, creating a chaotic whirl of fire and debris. Everything interacts. It's a military sandbox.

It also apparently offers an anal level of hardware realism, particularly for fans of the type of archaic Soviet military machinery that still powers combat in North Korea. The violence may be slightly less realistic. "The blood is just placeholder – it won't be in the game. We're shooting for a Teen rating," says the presenter, and we're not sure if he's joking or not.

Thematically, this is an adult game, about killing for money. If the industry wants its rating system to be taken seriously, it's going to have to be more mature about it than Blood = Bad.

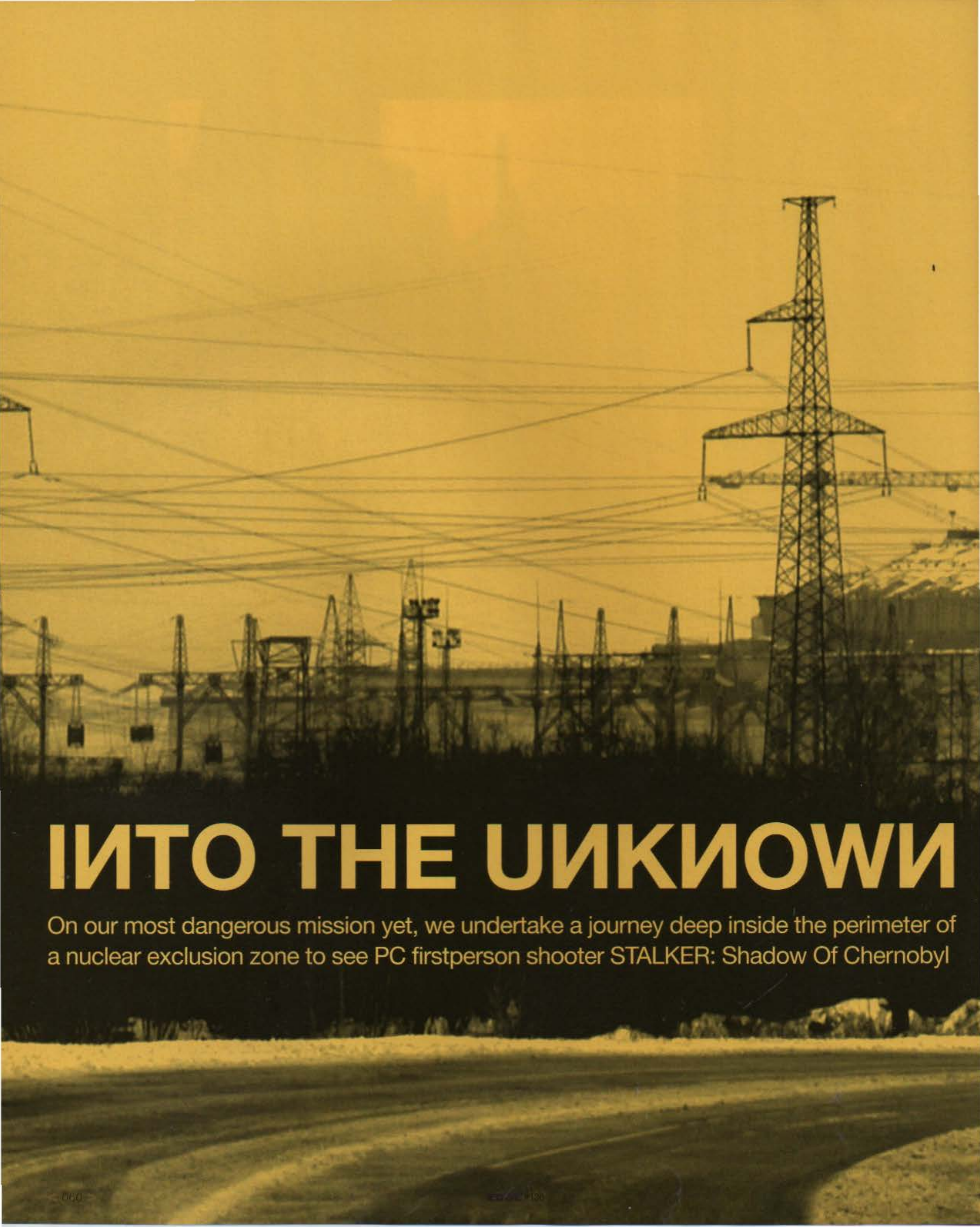
And then it's over. Activision thanks the journalists for their impending support, the journalists applaud and filter out of the theatre, and a pile of metal-box press kits disappears like a crop under locusts. It vanishes faster still when the locusts realise there's a Lego Darth Vader minifig inside. Think of the eBay value, say their grins. We grab a muffin, and head out of the theatre. A couple of tourists are posing to have their pictures taken with one of the 'troopers. One of them giggles: "Hey, aren't you a little short for a…" As we walk away, we're sure we can hear the terrible sound of an out-of-work actor's heart breaking.





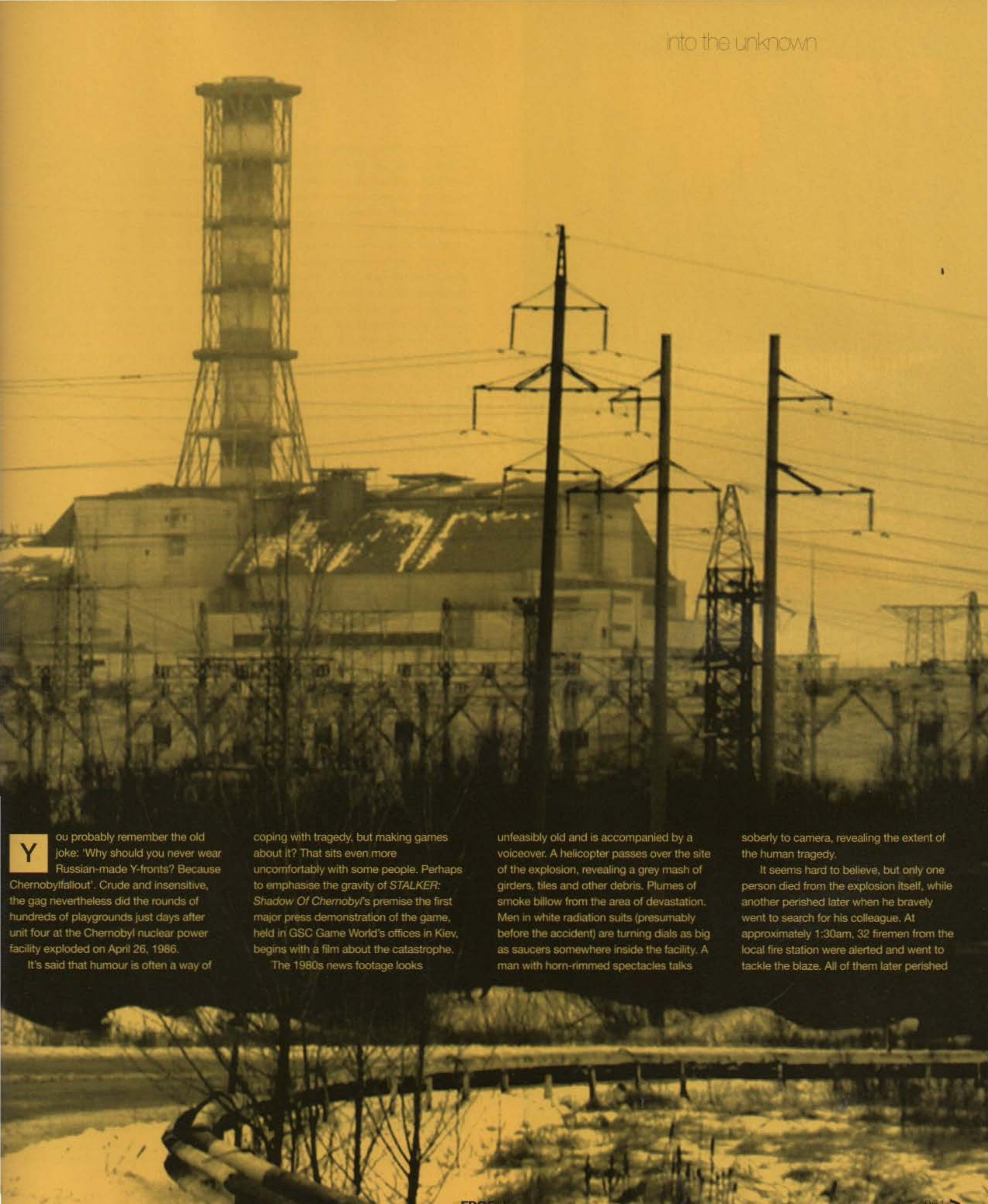


Mercenaries has been lauded by Sony for its looks, and is already well advanced in the development stage. The game sees you tracking criminals across a war-torn North Korea of the future



INTO THE UNKNOWN

On our most dangerous mission yet, we undertake a journey deep inside the perimeter of a nuclear exclusion zone to see PC firstperson shooter STALKER: Shadow Of Chernobyl



You probably remember the old joke: 'Why should you never wear Russian-made Y-fronts? Because Chernobylfallout'. Crude and insensitive, the gag nevertheless did the rounds of hundreds of playgrounds just days after unit four at the Chernobyl nuclear power facility exploded on April 26, 1986.

It's said that humour is often a way of coping with tragedy, but making games about it? That sits even more uncomfortably with some people. Perhaps to emphasise the gravity of *STALKER: Shadow Of Chernobyl*'s premise the first major press demonstration of the game, held in GSC Game World's offices in Kiev, begins with a film about the catastrophe.

The 1980s news footage looks unfeasibly old and is accompanied by a voiceover. A helicopter passes over the site of the explosion, revealing a grey mash of girders, tiles and other debris. Plumes of smoke billow from the area of devastation. Men in white radiation suits (presumably before the accident) are turning dials as big as saucers somewhere inside the facility. A man with horn-rimmed spectacles talks soberly to camera, revealing the extent of the human tragedy.

It seems hard to believe, but only one person died from the explosion itself, while another perished later when he bravely went to search for his colleague. At approximately 1:30am, 32 firemen from the local fire station were alerted and went to tackle the blaze. All of them later perished









from acute radiation sickness. Some 50,000 workers and families living in the surrounding areas were evacuated on buses over the next two days. These are the only statistics we are told about.

Of course, the full extent of the human tragedy could only be assessed years afterwards, and for obvious reasons the government played down the death toll. Greenpeace Ukraine, however, suggests that over 32,000 people have since died as a direct result of the accident, some 7,000 of them from the crew sent to 'clean up' the site. This does not even begin to cover the hundreds of thousands of people made ill by the resulting fallout. On a couple of occasions *STALKER* developer GSC maintains that the game respects the memories of those who died following the explosion, but this rings a little hollow. For the record, we're no more troubled by this game's premise than that of EA's jingoistic *MOH: Rising Sun*, but GSC is clearly worried about accusations of insensitivity.

"We were sick and tired of people saying: 'The game looks beautiful and realistic, but where's the rest of it?'" begins **Sergey Ivanov**, the Russian developer's founder. "Today, you will have a chance to see what the game is all about."

It's a one-'level' demo created specifically for this press event. The word needs to go in inverted commas because one of *STALKER*'s most impressive features is its open-ended exploratory nature. The game universe is divided into 18 zones, and while some zones will not be accessible from the beginning, GSC promises that it will be possible to find multiple entry ways into each zone.

Many goals will be given to the player at the outset, but most will be picked up along the way, some from NPCs and others from fellow stalkers scavenging the land for artefacts. A simple goal might be to locate a radiation suit that allows exploration closer to the power plant. Another might be to locate and kill a powerful rival stalker. GSC is vague about mission specifics – merely confirming that one of the primary goals is to get the biggest haul of artefacts from each area.

We imagine it'll be like some warped version of 'Treasure Hunt', one clue leading







It takes two hours for the game to move from light to dark, and the gradual effect is both beautiful and unnerving. Don't admire the sunset too long, because the nocturnal creatures will be stirring







Abandoned towns and cities have always provided strong settings for survival horror games, but *STALKER*'s premise is far from fictional. GCS has photographed and filmed the area extensively

to another until the final destination, and ultimate point, of the game is revealed. CPU-controlled stalkers search for the very same artefacts as you, so getting to a location too late can change the outcome of the game. Seven different endings are mentioned by one of the GSC team, and eight by another. It's a seductive idea, but unfortunately there's no evidence of any of this going on in the demo we played.

Instead we're given a simple objective: find an enemy stalker, take the artefact he holds, and hand it in to a trader. A short cut-scene introduces the scenario. A pack of rabid, mutated hounds chase you and a colleague across a bridge. He goes down, caught and mauled by the animals, but you manage to get him into a small out-building just as he dies.

As we play through the demo, a GSC member excitedly points out his favourite features: "You can shoot the light fitting," he

and wood decomposes while trees and shrubs grow out of control. Indeed, it's the juxtaposition of the living with the dead that gives the game its unique atmosphere.

Throughout the day, GCS proudly shows pictures of the team in and around the Chernobyl site. There are areas in the game drawn from imagination alone, but mostly the landscape reflects the changes that have occurred over the intervening 16 years. The following day, we are taken to the Chernobyl plant itself and the adjoining town that housed all the workers and their families. It's the archetypal ghost town, like something out of a Stephen King novel.

With rich source material like this, it's understandable that GCS wanted to reproduce everything in fine detail. A Ferris wheel peeks over some high-rise flats. We're told that a newly built fairground was due to open a day or two after the explosion took place, and you can bet that

STALKER's realism and attention to detail are remarkable. Textures are rich, but there's also a haunting quality to this universe

offers, as we're about to exit the building. Indeed, the bullet pings off the shade and the light swings around the gloomy interior casting pretty shadows. It's a clever effect, but probably not enough to turn today's PC gamers' heads. It's going to take more than realtime lighting to really make an impact.

In the outside world, *STALKER*'s much-talked-about realism and attention to detail are remarkable. Textures are rich and the landscaping panoramic, but there's also a haunting quality to this universe. The game is set in 2010 in a kind of parallel future, a vision of what might have been.

Electricity pylons tower over the horizon adding a familiar look to the landscape, but they also contribute to the sense of deterioration, of a world scarred by technology. Industrial buildings crumble

it will make it into the final game. The area we are confined to in the demo is clearly some distance away from any of that. Railway tracks overgrown with weeds and corrugated buildings are the inspiration here. The mutant dogs from the cut-scene can be seen scavenging around, but they're not nearly as frightening as GCS wants us to believe. They attack with a *Serious Sam*-like singlemindedness, but a few rounds from an automatic weapon deals with them quickly. And this is where we begin to have doubts.

These are compounded when the rival stalker is approached. Exhibiting some rather erratic AI, he begins to shoot at us. We shoot back. Rival stalker dies. If these enemies are anything to go by, then GCS has a bog-standard FPS wrapped up in one



PROFILE: GSC GAME WORLD

Ukrainian families

GSC shares a huge industrial office block in Kiev with a number of other companies, including BMW. It's the kind of building you see in 1970s documentaries about the eastern block, walls that seem to be five feet thick and stairways made out of concrete. Plain, simple and pragmatic.

It's testament to GCS's success that, once past the austere reception area, its offices are kitted out with expensive leather chairs, wooden floors and all the hi-tech equipment you'd find in any modern development house.

Founded in 1995, GCS started out making Russian-language electronic encyclopedias and edutainment software. Its big break came in 1999, when it presented a demo of *Cossacks: European Wars* at Milia. This RTS, from such a modest developer, picked up many accolades and the game was eventually signed by CDV.

Though many developers are beginning to spring up in Ukraine, GSC has fast become one of the country's most successful and high-profile game studios. It believes it owes some of its success to remaining true to the themes that drive the country's culture.

SOFTOGRAPHY

Cossacks: European Wars
Cossacks: Back To War
Cossacks: The Art Of War
Cossacks: Napoleonic Wars
American Conquest
Hover Ace
FireStarter
Codename: Outbreak



The GSC team visits the fairground that never opened. You'll be able to do so in the game



DISASTER SCENE
What actually caused the Chernobyl reactor to explode?

It was human error, pure and simple. The day before reactor number four exploded it was due to be shut down for routine maintenance. However, a handful of scientists decided to test the reactor to see if it could generate enough power to run emergency equipment and the core pumps for its water-cooling system. This procedure had been carried out before on another reactor, but on this occasion little if no communication had been made between the team executing the test and the people responsible for maintenance and safety of the nuclear power facility.

Due to an operational error, power fell to a dangerously low level, and because an automatic trip switch had been circumvented the reactor did not shut down automatically. This left frantic operators attempting to manually stabilise the reactor with adjustments to steam pressure, heat control and cooling rod placement every few seconds. Eventually, an increase in heat production ruptured part of the fuel feed, reacting with water and causing a steam explosion, which destroyed the reactor core.



Though helicopters could be seen patrolling the skies in the demo, it's still unclear what purpose they will serve. Though ground-based vehicles can be driven, it's not possible to take to the skies

of the most atmospheric game universes ever conceived. And while that might appease PC gamers the world over, it's disappointing that enemy behaviour is, by this demo's standards, mono-dynamic.

We quiz the project lead, **Anton Bolshakov**, about the current state of the creature AI. "Today you are only seeing the most simplistic monsters and there is still much balancing to do," he defends. "Later in the game you will encounter military stalkers, for instance. They move in groups and there will be a squad leader. If you take out the leader then the group will not work against you so effectively.

"Also, there will be mutants with mind-control abilities. These can see and hear through the eyes and ears of other mutants, so they can organise attacks on the player using several other creatures."

Later in the day it's rumoured that the creatures inhabiting the *STALKER* demo have been imported in from *FireStarter*, a *Serious Sam* clone also made by GSC. We only hope there's plenty of time for all that extra 'balancing'. Another disappointment is the way the creatures react to gunfire. There are no discernible body jolts when bullets hit home, and the animation is of a generally limited standard.

It should be noted that during this demonstration we only encountered four creature types: a stalker, a humanoid and two types of hound. However, it's clear that if the combat is to match up to the atmosphere generated by the haunting environments a great deal of effort needs to be spent improving the look and behaviour of these assailants.

"This is only a short demo," reassures Bolshakov. "In the final game there will be friendly stalkers who you can co-operate and trade with. Not everything you meet will attack and it's important that the player remains open to every possibility."

"There will be mutants with mind-controlling abilities. These can see and hear through the eyes of other creatures"

The gravity of the situation

A game world populated by adversaries undertaking the same quest as you? It's *STALKER*'s most attractive feature. There's no figure on how many other stalkers are in the game world, but swift artefact gathering is important for another reason: many can be combined together to produce special items and effects. It's something we drag out of Bolshakov with more interrogation. "There's a gravitation glove," he finally reveals by way of an example. "It gives the player telekinetic powers."

We probe further. So, the player can





Throwing bolts will reveal anomalies, though this part of the game feels a little random





move objects around with his mind? "No, not quite. It's like an invisible force that comes from the glove. You can target objects and throw them around."

He doesn't seem to want to give much else away. Asked for an example of another artefact power he declines, only hinting that scientists can be persuaded to help you work out how to harness them to best effect. There are many secrets here.

However, Bolshakov does promise that the game's day/night cycle will alter the pace and mood of the game. Each stalker has three key life gauges: health, endurance and a radioactivity level. Radiation sickness can be cured, amazingly, with vodka; endurance levels restored with sleep; and health with a combination of rest and medi-packs. Because everything runs on a 24-hour clock (approximately two hours in realtime) the player must find safe locations to sleep. Of course, you are entirely free to hunt at night (GSC hints that events alter after darkness falls) but the wildlife will dramatically change, too.

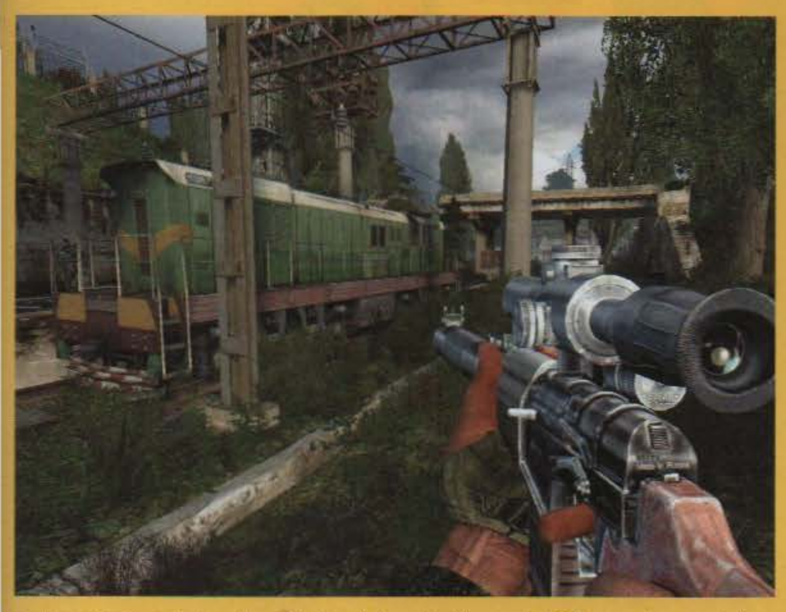
We linger in the demo long enough to see the sun dim behind some Constable-esque clouds and eventually fall beneath the horizon. This landscape is creepy during the day, but even without finished creatures the *STALKER* world is absolutely terrifying by night. A small torch can be used to light the way, but it affords scant comfort against the shadows and fog clustering around.

It would be unfair to judge *STALKER* by this demo alone, because so much of what will make it unique is absent. The creatures may lack dynamism, but when darkness falls any slight movement or distant growl gets the heart racing. And let's not get too critical: the enemies that currently populate the world are not terrible, they just don't match up to the rest of the game.

Another feature we aren't so sure about is the inclusion of 'anomalies'. These are invisible radioactive whirlwinds that are as frightening and irritating as they sound. A standard Geiger counter can pick up traces of these phantom killers, but one step in the wrong direction ensures you're sucked up and torn apart, leading to an instant death. It's possible to throw metal bolts around to pinpoint these anomalies, but it still feels like you're playing a retarded version of *Harry Goes Home*.

It would be a pity if the vast and complex landscapes could only be traversed on foot, but GSC promises that later in the game vehicles can be commandeered, including an APC and a truck. Though Hind helicopters can be seen patrolling the skies – and, again, we are told they play a more significant role later in the game – no air vehicles can be piloted.

Unsurprisingly, much of *STALKER* at this stage is potential, but the demo certainly gives us reason to believe that it will, at best, be a moody and interesting FPS. However, the multiple endings, gravity gloves, military stalker squads and mind-controlling mutants are the big variables that will decide *STALKER*'s fate. Will it be one of the most innovative titles in recent memory, or an over-ambitious three-legged turkey?



Trading artefacts and information with other stalkers should separate GSC's game from most other FPSes doing the rounds. However, these elements have yet to be implemented into the experience











Photography: Martin Johansson, SuperPOV

KOJIMA VERSUS THE BIG ROBOTS

In which 'big robots' are metaphors for a mad dog, a soulless movie industry and the Japanese games press as we find Mr Metal Gear Solid on ebullient form in Tokyo

At the age of 40, I'm trying to screen off the business aspects of gaming and concentrate on developing great games. I shouldn't say this in front of the management at Konami, but in the future I don't want to pay attention to money, demographic data, etc – I want to become freelance and create the games I always dreamt of. Creative work needs strong finances, but the business aspects of the game industry are slowly burning me out."

Hideo Kojima is speaking frankly as he relaxes in his office, situated within a skyscraper in Tokyo's Roppongi Hills area. Only a few years ago, this part of the city was infamous for throwing up the seedier side of Japanese life, with its drugs, prostitution and hostess bars, but the dazzling chrome and glass surfaces it bears today give it a cleaner, more futuristic edge. It is a fitting environment for a man committed to pushing consumer gaming technology, a pursuit continuing with *Metal Gear Solid 3: The Snake Eater*, the latest version of which we will see later today.

But first some background. Kojima may be one of Japan's foremost game makers, but not much is known about his motivation. Today we're going looking for some answers.

In the beginning

Hideo Kojima was was born 1963. We ask him of his earliest memories, looking for clues



that led him to create some of the most ambitious videogames of all time. "The most intense memories from my childhood deal with death," he says, smiling brightly nonetheless. "I almost drowned in a river once, I was attacked by a savage dog, and I nearly got run over by a train when I crossed a track. I dealt with several life-threatening experiences growing up."

At a very young age Kojima moved with his family from Tokyo to the small city of Shirasaki, where he enjoyed the ocean and the nature surrounding his home. Then his life took a different turn when his family moved to Kansai. Missing nature, he became withdrawn, and began playing on his own. Then he turned to television. "My parents forced me to watch television since they didn't have time for me," Kojima explains. "I watched everything obsessively: entertainment, cooking shows, nature and wildlife, anime – the subject didn't matter."

Being left home alone had a significant effect on the young Kojima. "There are keys in Japan called kagi-ko, home keys, which are placed in a string round the neck," he explains. "I used to get these, since no one was home when I finished school. It was tough. I came home first, and had to spend the time alone – which I hated; the house was silent and empty. I still remember those feelings of solitude. I still feel strange coming home to my own family and finding out there's someone already at home. Each time I travel and stay at a hotel I put the TV on as soon as I enter the room, just to deal with the feelings of loneliness."

Going to the movies

As a child, like many children Kojima dreamed of becoming an astronaut. As he got older his interests changed from science-fiction to thrillers, and rather than an astronaut he thought about becoming a policeman or a detective. All the while, though, he really wanted to make things.

"As a child, I wanted to be an artist or illustrator. But I was held back by a relative who was an artist. He had financial problems, and that discouraged me. The common belief in Japan, at the time, was that fine schools and proper education led to safe and well-paid jobs. This was the Japanese ideal – a regimentation which had consequences for everyone who tried not to follow the mainstream. My dreams of becoming a movie director or book author came into conflict with this unwritten rule of society. It made life harder for me, and made me feel alone and rejected."

"My most intense memories deal with death. I almost drowned in a river, I was attacked by a dog, and I was nearly run over by a train"



The percentage meter reveals how well Snake is blending into his surroundings thanks to his current choice of outfit and type of face paint. In this instance he's chosen to go 'naked' from the head up

Nevertheless, Kojima began writing his own short stories, maintaining an ambition to become an author until high school. "My own novels, if you can call them novels, were my hobby," he says, explaining that he sent many of his efforts to Japanese magazines in the hope of getting them printed. "Alas, I was never published. The magazines wanted 100-page stories, but mine used to be around 400 pages long."

Kojima moved his attention to movies, diligently working with a friend who owned an 8mm camera to produce short children's films. Still his parents discouraged his creative urges. "It made me feel even more desperate," he explains. "My family never understood my ambitions. I knew this deep in my soul, so I didn't share my creative hopes and dreams. My friends concentrated on their education and spent most of the time studying. We had a pop band, but it was only a simple hobby project. My friends never shared my dream of being able to support myself within the framework of a creative work, neither in music or on film."

Getting into games

On leaving college, Kojima's friends went to work in banks or insurance companies. At the time, the videogame industry wasn't an especially fashionable pursuit in Japan, and it didn't sit well with a man who'd focused on economics for his degree.

"I remember it very well," says Kojima. "Everyone said: 'Don't do it, don't do it'. Shortly after I joined Konami I went to a wedding where I was asked to make the celebration speech. In Japan the speaker is always thoroughly introduced, and the master of ceremonies told the audience: 'This is Hideo Kojima, a man of great talent, which he's throwing away at Konami'. I also met a former friend from college on a train who simply asked me: 'Why?' while shaking his his head. But people have changed their opinions since then. Nowadays they greet m with great admiration. I don't think my mothe has ever told anyone that I work in the videogame industry, though."

Kojima's first job at Konami was as an assistant on the follow-up to the company's massively successful *Antarctic Adventure* on the MSX family of home computers. "I presented tons of ideas!" he recalls. "My des was crowded with papers and drafts. I was so stressed and wanted to perform so badly that I hardly ever went to the toilet. I was working hard as bone, from early morning to late at night. My colleagues worried themselves with my obsessive workforce, by never paid attention. After a session, I could feel empty, but during the night I dreamed about the project, and in the dreams came new ideas, and the day after I was full of powerful new visions. Eventually one of the

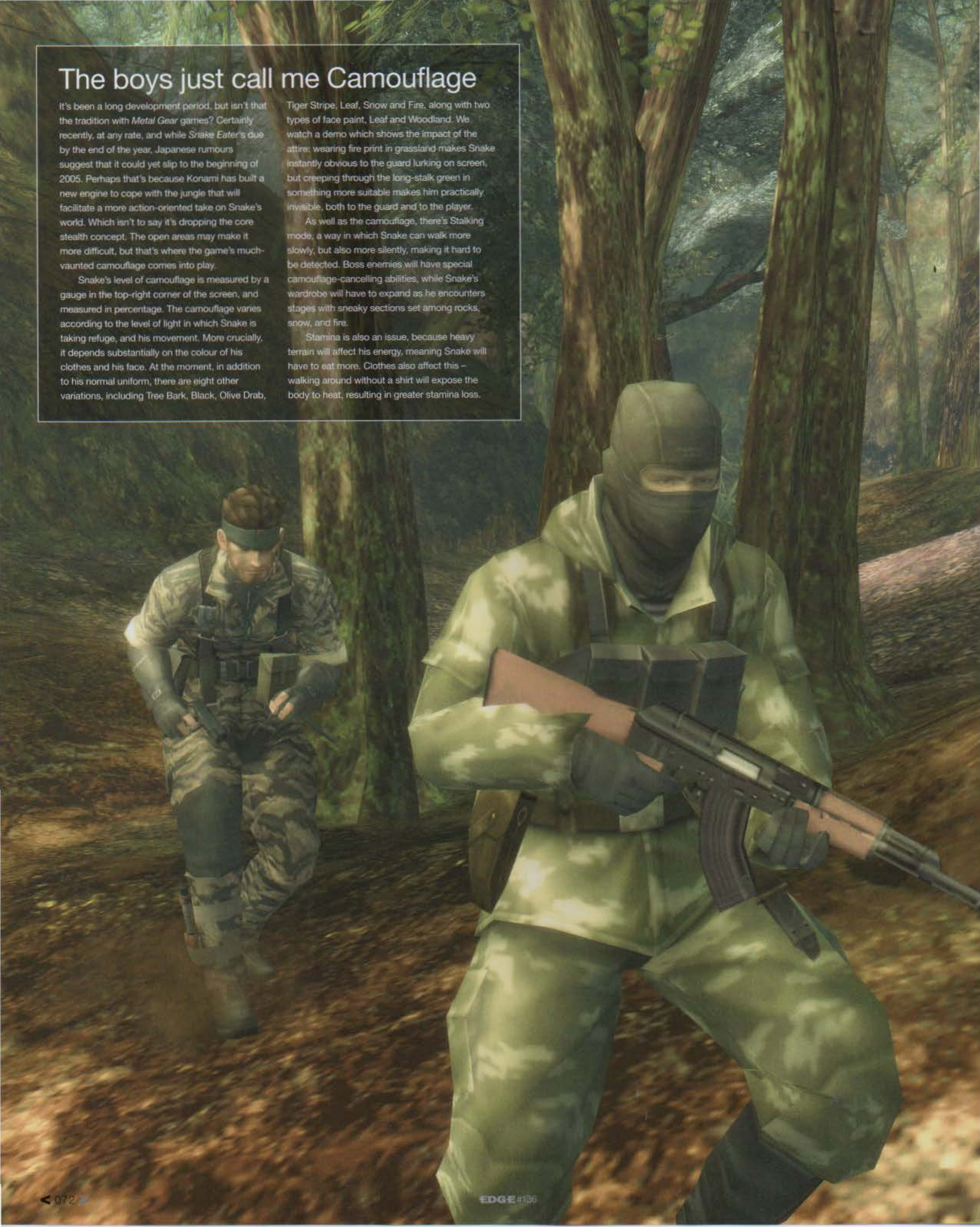




Snake's Fire outfit is hardly a good choice when running around verdant jungles (top) – something reflected by a 0% reading on his camouflage meter. Tree Bark is a much more sensible option



Snake's athleticism is emphasised during jungle warfare, allowing you to hang from trees using a single arm while picking off enemies. We want to see more 'Predator' references in the game



The boys just call me Camouflage

It's been a long development period, but isn't that the tradition with *Metal Gear* games? Certainly recently, at any rate, and while *Snake Eater*'s due by the end of the year, Japanese rumours suggest that it could yet slip to the beginning of 2005. Perhaps that's because Konami has built a new engine to cope with the jungle that will facilitate a more action-oriented take on Snake's world. Which isn't to say it's dropping the core stealth concept. The open areas may make it more difficult, but that's where the game's much-vaunted camouflage comes into play.

Snake's level of camouflage is measured by a gauge in the top-right corner of the screen, and measured in percentage. The camouflage varies according to the level of light in which Snake is taking refuge, and his movement. More crucially, it depends substantially on the colour of his clothes and his face. At the moment, in addition to his normal uniform, there are eight other variations, including Tree Bark, Black, Olive Drab, Tiger Stripe, Leaf, Snow and Fire, along with two types of face paint, Leaf and Woodland. We watch a demo which shows the impact of the attire: wearing fire print in grassland makes Snake instantly obvious to the guard lurking on screen, but creeping through the long-stalk green in something more suitable makes him practically invisible, both to the guard and to the player.

As well as the camouflage, there's Stalking mode, a way in which Snake can walk more slowly, but also more silently, making it hard to be detected. Boss enemies will have special camouflage-cancelling abilities, while Snake's wardrobe will have to expand as he encounters stages with sneaky sections set among rocks, snow, and fire.

Stamina is also an issue, because heavy terrain will affect his energy, meaning Snake will have to eat more. Clothes also affect this – walking around without a shirt will expose the body to heat, resulting in greater stamina loss.

bosses stepped forward and said to me: 'OK, Kojima, take it easy. We have a new project for you'."

The budding project leader worked on a clutch of other 8bit titles throughout the remainder of the '80s, including, of course, the first two *Metal Gear* games, both successful for Konami but not as big a deal as the likes of, say, its *Castlevania* or *Contra* series, which accounted for many millions of sales during their peaks. He went on to produce work on the PC Engine and 3DO, but it would be a while until he really arrived on the scene from an international perspective, with *Metal Gear Solid* on PS1.

Nuclear power

Hideo Kojima's most recent games focus energy on dealing with the threat of nuclear weapons. Despite the violence which surrounds such themes, however, there's always an ongoing strive for peace. This can be traced directly back to his childhood.

"My parents were born in the 1930s and experienced the war," Kojima explains. "My father used to tell me stories about the bombing of Tokyo, how he was running the streets searching for shelter from the bombs and fires. He told me he carried wounded children to safe places. His stories had a tremendous impact on me.

"I believe my father inspired me to more than I can imagine, despite the fact that we never shared similar interests. He was too young to join the army, but he had wanted to join the navy and fight for his country – he even carried the navy's uniform occasionally. At the same time he was opposed to the war. He lost a lot of friends and could see all the terror and suffering the war brought down on Japan. It was like walking a tightrope. He hated the Americans for the war, but when he got older he made contact with the United States and accepted, and finally fell in love with, American culture. I believe that I share this tightrope ambiguity with my father."

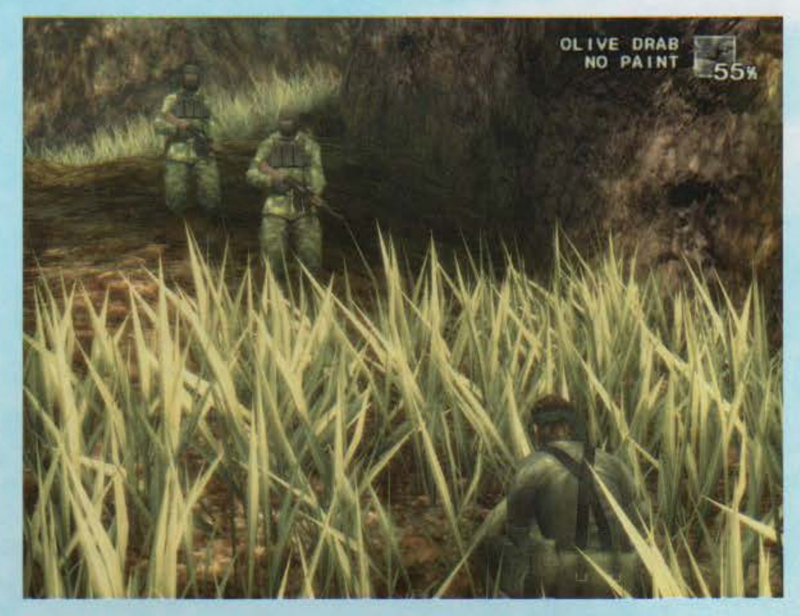
Kojima believes that his father's age at the time of conflict was a catalyst for embracing America. If he had been born a few years earlier he would have hated the Americans even after the war, goes his reasoning. We talk about how Japanese people felt about having American troops stationed in the country for several years after the conflict. "The Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC made an exhibition a few years ago about the atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki," Kojima begins. "The exhibition focused on the consequences for the Japanese people, and it stirred up a lot of emotions in the US, since most Americans believe that the bombs alone ended the war. Most Japanese don't share this opinion. But public opinions change over time. The tragic and undisputed fact is that the bombs killed a lot of innocent people."

"With Metal Gear Solid 3 I want to tell a story about a short time in history where two superpowers almost destroyed our world"





Though much of *MGS3*'s early publicity has focused on what Snake gets up to in jungly scenarios, there also exists a selection of more familiar environments. Expect explosive action



The *MGS* series has been one of the pioneers of stealth-based action, and it's being taken to a new level with part three. Enemies have improved AI, but Snake also has more complex means to avoid detection

Metal Gear Solid 3 continues to demonstrate Kojima's obsession with nuclear weaponry, but from the perspective of the cold war: "During the cold war, USA and USSR developed more and more fierce nuclear weapons. The two superpowers stood against each other and the whole world feared for human existence. This has changed today, of course, and Russia and USA have improved their relations. But it felt so awfully stupid that the future for all mankind rested in the hands of only those two countries. With *Metal Gear Solid 3* I want to show this duality, and tell a story about a short time in history where two superpowers almost destroyed our world."

Thus the game has a distinctly yesteryear feel. Could the *Metal Gear Solid* franchise be adapted to the political landscape of the '00s? "If I will continue working with the series in the future, and if no new and young powers takes over, I want it to be more at pace with contemporary life, but I don't think this line of thought would be appreciated by a younger game management."

Control freak

It's a well-known fact that Kojima likes to have total control when developing his games, getting involved in every part of the process, from scripting to cut-scene direction. By having such a hands-on role he believes, understandably, that his personality is more accurately reflected in the finished article. He has written most of *MGS3*'s script on his own, and explains where his ideas come from: "I read a lot of contemporary history and socio-economical literature in the job, and in my spare time I read a lot of fiction. I really read a lot. I use to team up with Fukushima-san, who creates scenarios for the games when I write the scripts, and we push each other forward. I often have trouble finding enough good material from the cold war to get me going and be creatively inspired. But I read a lot of fiction from the time period, and try to imagine how the agents lived. It's impossible to get it 100 per cent accurate, but it gives me a good picture of the 1960s.

"When I work with the *Metal Gear Solid* games I have to become a tight unit with Snake and put myself into his position. At those times I keep away from influences that can be distracting. It's hard screening off, but necessary if I want to keep the original ideas."



A new 3D engine is powering the outdoor environments. It'll have to go some to outperform Melbourne House's *Transformers* code (see p94), but Kojima claims to relish the challenge of reinventing technology

"Japanese game media is shit. Most reporters who come here for an interview haven't done their homework; they haven't done research"

It looks like the third *MGS* will feature at least as much dialogue as the series' previous outing, which is only going to fuel the fires of those who claim that Kojima should be making movies rather than interactive work. "It's exactly as the critics say!" Kojima blurts. "The games include both aspects. I could remove the story and create a pure hide-and-seek game, but I am convinced that the audience wouldn't enjoy it. You need to keep the player's attention and create a sense of responsibility towards the characters and the worlds they inhabit. If I took away the storyline, much of this magic would be lost. If the player gets a mission there simply has to be a story to motivate the player to act in certain ways."

What about a proper *Metal Gear Solid* film, then, with Snake up there on the big screen? Kojima considers this for a moment. "It's not that I don't want to see a blockbuster based on the game," he says, "but I must admit that I have trouble imagining a film dealing with the storyline of *Metal Gear Solid*. A film would have to be about a gigantic robot and a great number of bosses..."

And what about the general trend for turning game properties into movies? "I have seen 'Resident Evil' and both of the 'Tomb Raider' films – the latest one, by the way, truly sucks," grimaces Kojima. "I guess Hollywood lack good ideas and wants to capitalise on famous brands. That's the simple reason why we have all those films based on games. Unfortunately the game industry seems to have the same problem finding new ideas. The game and film industries are cynical – everything's supposed to be made for the masses, often without any trace of deeper meaning added from the creators."

Isn't this just a reflection of modern society in general? Kojima agrees: "Every artifact produced nowadays is much more commercialised. The soul has really vanished, there are only empty boxes, shaped after dull blueprints. Let's blame greed, because it's poisoning the soul. Greed can kill anything. The urge to create or tell stories is the base for the soul, the core, and without the core there is nothing.

"I don't mind seeing games becoming films, but I don't like licensed games. Take *Enter The Matrix*, for example, where the game developers picked something here, and something there, from the film, only in order to make a poor game."

Something's rotten in Tokyo

While we have him in a combative mood, we decide to ask Kojima about a story we've heard about a rift between him and one of Japan's big videogame magazines.

"Japanese game media is shit," he says, plainly. "Most Japanese reporters who come here for an interview on *Metal Gear Solid* haven't done their homework; they haven't done their research, and you can hardly consider them being intelligent creatures at all. You can print that."

We're tempted not to delve further, but do so anyway. "I am certain that most game reporters in Japan are not really journalists, they are useless idiots," Kojima continues. "It's easy for us to compare the quality of reporters from Japan and other parts of the world when we visit E3 or ECTS, and this fact makes me mad."

Time to change tack, perhaps. What about the notion of a single-platform videogame industry, where technology stabilises and we have a level playing field? "The game industry is dependent on technique – and I like it that way," says Kojima. "Personally, I enjoy the concept of games as fresh goods. I don't want to play my old games – I actually don't want to see them. There will never be the perfect hardware. There will always be new machines and new platforms – these evolutions push the business forward."

How about motivation – after 18 years at Konami, is it still there to the same degree? "Yes, the motivation's still the same as before," says Kojima, "but I don't think my fellow colleagues share my passion, they probably consider themselves as ordinary white-collar workforce in an international corporation. That's a logical result in a business which constantly grows and becomes more and more mainstream."

And so we prepare to leave Kojima, having enjoyed a refreshing few hours in his company. It's rare for such a significant player to talk so openly and honestly, but perhaps he feels like he deserves to be able to, thanks to his accomplishments.

Before we go, we ask what he thinks will happen with his legacy. "The DNA I created in *Metal Gear Solid* will continue to live on in other games," he says. "You can already see it in *Splinter Cell* and *Syphon Filter* – they're parts of my legacy." We wonder if their creators are quite so outspoken.







Konami is carefully orchestrating its PR campaign for Snake's second PS2 adventure, its latest move being to painstakingly illustrate the differences in his selection of outfits. It's comprehensive stuff



Though this *MGS* has a pronounced organic feel, the overriding theme is the threat of nuclear weaponry, the game's cold war setting evoking memories of a grim, paranoid period in history

Town planning



Copenhagen may not be a traditional centre of game development, but that perception may change courtesy of a local government initiative to invigorate the city's creative arts scene. We were invited to the Danish capital to find out why electronic entertainment is now just as important as music, film and other art-based industries to a creative city's lifeblood

The small Danish capital Copenhagen (population 1.7m) is in the midst of a creative rebranding. It has ambitions to be mentioned along with Paris, Berlin or Barcelona as a major focus for the creative industries. Uniquely, videogames are included in this proposition alongside music and fashion. It's rare enough for anyone to even consider games as a creative industry, let alone the municipal government of a European capital. Imagine Red Ken dropping in to ask Phil Harrison, Jez San and Demis Hassibis what they'd do to make London a better place in which to live and work – that's the equivalent of what's happening right now in Copenhagen.

We are invited to spend three days touring the city's development houses, universities and media outlets, culminating in a hearing at City Hall to be attended by a number of influential local politicians. **Filip Lau**, of Danish branding agency Kontrapunkt, which is co-ordinating the project, confides that during his involvement he has discovered that "politicians don't know shit about videogames."

He notes that the government only woke up to the fact that Denmark could successfully export something more than just beer, butter and bacon with the international success of cheesy pop group Aqua in 1998. Similarly, it's taken the rapid expansion of Copenhagen-based *Hitman* creator IO Interactive (recently sold for a headline-grabbing £23m) to force videogames on to the political agenda.

Denmark has always been a world leader in architectural design (think Arne Jacobsen) and film (Lars Von Trier and his Dogme crew). Suddenly, City Hall has realised that videogames constitute a new creative industry with great commercial as well as cultural potential. This doesn't happen very often. In years to come, we shall see Danish games proliferate. And it all started around about here.

Games that grow

So what can the local politicians actually do to encourage the growth of the videogame industry in Copenhagen? It's made clear from the outset that they don't have huge business development funds at their disposal, nor the ability to pass legislation in order to offer tax breaks and subsidies to game development startups, this power lying in the hands of the national government. Nevertheless, the local developers have plenty of suggestions.

During our visit, we meet three very different developers in the form of mainstream action game producer Deadline Games, long-established kids' game outfit ITE and a startup called Pinkfloor, which hopes to crack the teenage girl market. IO Interactive – the biggest fish in this small pond – can't attend the debate due to embroilment in the Eidos takeover talks, but in a way its achievement has elevated it beyond the remit of this project. The Copenhagen government wants to know how it can nurture the talent at the city's disposal to engender further development success stories on IO's scale.

Danish game developers are always going to suffer from a limited home market. Their games have to be internationally focused in order to be profitable, while foreign publishers and distributors are inevitably important. "There is a distance between developer and consumer that may not exist in the UK," says ITE's **Søren Sørensen**. Many Danish developers

GAMES DEV.

REC

CREATIVE
FACTORY

CREATIVE
IDEAS

YOU NEED BOTH

1:

GIANTS
PRODUCTION

DAVIDS
CREATIVE

The international videogame industry is likely to take notice of a city where a large number of students are graduating with skills directly relevant to game development



The Center For Computer Games research, based at Copenhagen's IT University, is an impressive modern facility that churns out masters students with a strong holistic education in all aspects of the production, design and culture of videogames

have a certain advantage when targeting the all-important US and UK markets thanks to the high level of English spoken, but they are still isolated from the game industry's traditional heartlands.

"The answer is to establish Copenhagen as a recognised regional centre for games research and development," argues Sørensen. Publishers are more likely to take notice of an integrated scene than of developers working autonomously. This united front is one of the aims of the Danish Producer's Association – an organisation similar to TIGA in the UK – to which all Copenhagen's game developers are affiliated.

In addition, the international game industry is likely to take notice of a city where a large number of students are graduating with skills directly relevant to game development. The IT University processes masters students through its Center For Computer Games Research, where programmes combine technical and cultural studies. From September, a new Game Education postgraduate programme, which amalgamates resources from ITU and three other local universities, will offer units that correspond to actual jobs on a game development team. However, assistant professor Troels Degn Johannson is quick to add that their courses are educational, not strictly vocational. While many graduates will find jobs in the industry, he feels it's equally important that the research they contribute to during their time at ITU can accelerate the understanding of what makes a great videogame, and applying this to new forms and concepts. Naturally, Copenhagen's developers are watching closely.

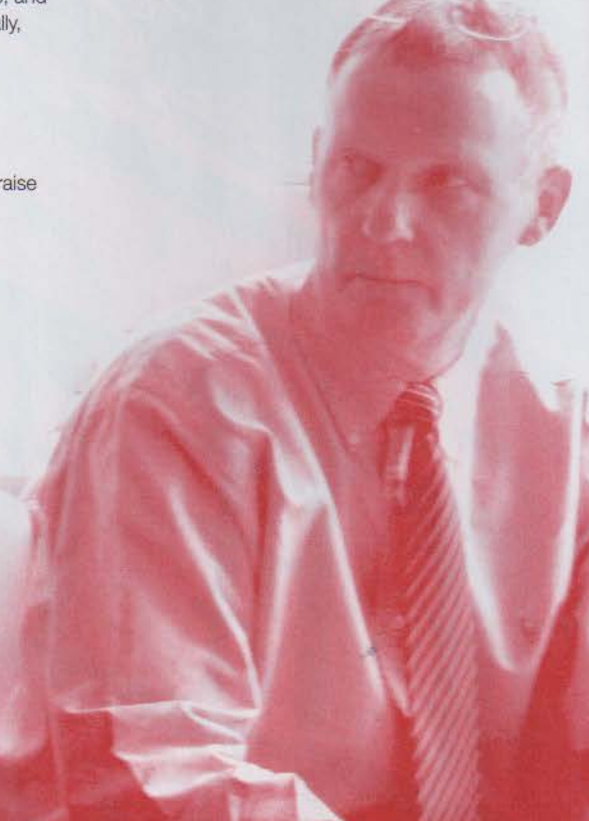
Get the party started

There is a definite feeling that if the Copenhagen government doesn't have funds to plough into development at a base level, then at least it can raise the profile of the city's game scene (already an impressively integrated entity) through marketing. "We know they have the budget," says Sørensen, indicating the involvement of Kontrapunkt in this project.

Many of the major players we speak to call for an event of some kind to celebrate locally produced software and raise the city's profile. The ideal nature of such an event is disputed, however. A trade show like ECTS is unlikely to be supported by international publishers, while, conversely, publishers would be the only direct beneficiaries from a consumer show.

Launch events for games created in Copenhagen, such as the recently released *Gangland* from Media Mobsters, would seem to be a decent compromise. As Sony demonstrates with its regular 'million sales' parties in London, the promise of free booze and good music in an exclusive location is enough to bring the game industry's movers and shakers together with luminaries and liggers from other spheres, advancing the recognition and acceptance of the PlayStation2 brand and serving to forge contacts between creatives in different fields. No single Copenhagen game company would be able to underwrite such an event, but with a little local government aid, voila: the profile of the game industry within the city, especially in the Danish mass media, could be heightened at a boozy stroke.

Copenhagen already has an ideal base for





Games in government: we set the agenda in Copenhagen City Hall's historic debating chamber



Chris Mottes from Deadline Games (second right) makes the case for a more exciting city

Copenhagen can never expect to compete with a city ten times its size, but ensuring that Denmark can attract émigrés from Britain and the rest of Europe is crucial



consumer launch events in the form of Boomtown, an impressive new gaming café right in the centre of the city. Unlike the dank, sweaty hideaways of old, Boomtown is a modern, airy venue, equipped with over 100 top-spec PCs. The broadband network is provided by Danish telecom company TDC, which also owns an 80 per cent stake in the venture – a high-profile investment in the city's gaming scene that makes BT look massively out of touch.

If there is any doubt about the strength of native gaming culture in Denmark, Boomtown eradicates it. The café is open 24 hours, and you have to book in advance to play at weekends. Denmark's top *Counter-Strike* players hang out here, and publishers such as EA and Ubisoft have recognised Boomtown's influential status by providing pre-release code for *Battlefield: Vietnam* and *Far Cry*. Boomtown's online portal is the most popular in Denmark. Like neighbouring Germany, the Danes have a PC gaming culture (software sales are split roughly 65/35 with console games) and the community that has sprung up immediately around Boomtown shows that there is a healthy passion for games in Copenhagen, an important prerequisite for a thriving hobbyist scene.

Night on the town

City Hall has asked us to consider all factors that might generate a more creative environment in Copenhagen. To that end, we are taken for an evening in Christiania, the square mile in the city centre occupied by hippies in the late '60s and never reclaimed by 'the man'. Christiania has managed to resist any kind of gentrification and the area still feels like a permanent Glastonbury festival. It's a magnet for bohemian artist types and is home to numerous divey bars, restaurants and gig venues. Even so, it's difficult to see an obvious correlation between Christiania and computer games, until Deadline's **Chris Mottes** steps in.

"The government must not close Christiania," he urges, in reference to the conservative ruling party's stated plan to overhaul the area. "Copenhagen needs these other entertainments to attract creative young people to the city." He then tells an anecdote about a promising employee who resigned from Deadline after six months and returned to London, complaining that there was nothing to do in Copenhagen. This is an exaggeration, and Copenhagen can never expect to compete with a city ten times its size, but ensuring that Denmark can attract émigrés from Britain and the rest of Europe is crucial. This is where the encouragement of other artistic industries and recreations has an impact on the videogame scene. Mottes also complains about

The major players

Who's who on the Copenhagen gaming scene





MEDIAMOBSTERS

PINKFLOOR

IT University of Copenhagen

IO Interactive
(CEO Janos Flösser)
Denmark's only premier-league developer and a shining example for what independent talent can achieve in any country. Formed in 1998 with seven employees, the successes of the *Hitman* and *Freedom Fighters* games now support a staff of 140. Eidos bought IO for £23 million in March.

Deadline Games
(CEO Chris Mottes)
Copenhagen's second-largest development house in terms of staff numbers, Deadline has previously concentrated on offbeat PC adventure games for the Scandanavian market but is close to announcing its new massmarket action title, in partnership with Take 2.

Interactive Television Entertainment
(CEO Søren Sørensen)
Copenhagen's oldest development house, originally a TV production company responsible for creating Hugo, a cartoon character. Hugo games on everything from PS2 to mobile phones are now the company's main business.

Media Mobsters
Smaller development outfit which recently released mob-themed RTS title *Gangland* through Whiptail Interactive.

Pinkfloor
Startup developer with a mission to produce games, TV shows and multimedia products for teenage girls.

Boomtown
Denmark's leading chain of gaming cafés, with four branches across the country including its impressive flagship store in Copenhagen, which houses over 100 top-drawer PCs.
International expansion has already begun with the opening of a Zurich branch. Boomtown.net is also a successful online gaming portal.

The IT University Of Copenhagen (ITU)
Academic institution that runs a series of masters degree programmes through its Center For Computer Games Research.



Denmark's tough stance on immigration and the city's high taxes, underlining that anything preventing creative people from migrating to the city is an issue for the politicians to address.

The knowledge

Copenhagen's game scene is in a great position to expand. Supported by sympathetic academic courses and a strong consumer base, the potential is evident. Most of the city's developers (including IO, ITE and Deadline) have a background in TV or film production, meaning that crucial process management skills are already in place. A contrast is drawn with the current state of UK game development, in which several companies are struggling as a result of naïve business structures, with the guy who once programmed code finding himself at the head of the boardroom table.

This awareness, and a willingness to learn from successes and failures elsewhere, is also to Copenhagen's credit. While the UK game industry has grown in a spontaneous, haphazard fashion, Denmark's has the opportunity to develop more strategically, with (local) government interest and support. The mere fact that City Hall has instigated a debate about its potential role in the industry speaks volumes. Governmental input at any level into British videogames, especially when considering them in terms of a creative industry, is rare. Still, discussion at the hearing inevitably returns to financial concerns. The toughest part of game development is getting a project through to demo stage in order to attract funding from publishers or investors. Sørensen sees the only truly effective solution as a £50,000 municipal development fund for exciting new game projects, to help them over the initial hurdle to the point where they can attract investment independently.

In terms of startups, there are barriers to surmount before companies can even begin thinking about programming that first line of code. Videogame designers, like artists and musicians, need cheap studio space. They also need a broadband infrastructure; access to knowledge and advice both in terms of games design and small business operation; and the ability to share development tools and ideas with other games companies and with people working in related disciplines such as design, animation and film production. Currently, Denmark is not regarded as a country or a culture that encourages entrepreneurism, and this state of affairs is certainly within the local politicians' remit to address.

Kontrapunkt's aim is to produce blueprints for 'practical utopias' that Copenhagen's government can work toward for the good of the city. One of the agency's more idealistic suggestions is the creation of a 'virtual Christiania' for game designers: a physical or virtual space where visionaries from different backgrounds could exchange some of their more experimental ideas. The hope is the next EyeToy, *Sim City* or *Rez* could emerge under these free-thinking conditions, but this dream seems more utopian than practical at the moment.

At least the politicians seem energised by the debate. After the hearing at City Hall, one of Copenhagen's politicians was overheard promising new funding initiatives for videogame startups. With regard to the city's existing development houses, Deadline's Chris Mottes hopes that the lines of communication now established between the game industry and the politicians remain open: "We are organised, we meet regularly under the auspices of the Producer's Association, and we have lots of ideas. All we ask is that the politicians consult us."

Kontrapunkt's Filip Lau was pleasantly surprised to see how the debate opened up everyone's thinking. "It seems that the specific rules and conditions for the games industry are not as relevant as having a vibrant and cool city to live in and be in," he says.

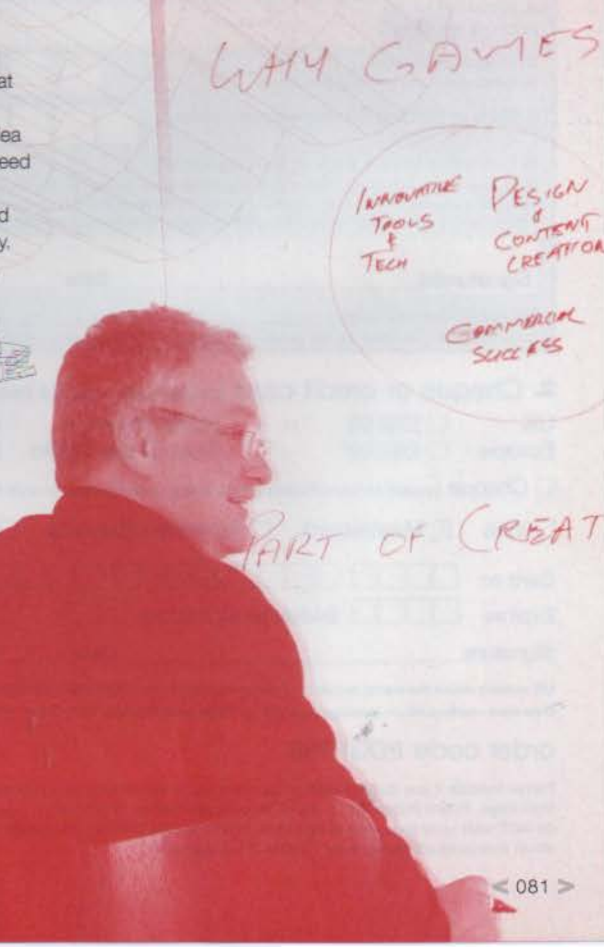
"The conclusions deal more with the overall creative ambience in the city than industry-specific laws and regulations. It is about being open to new thoughts and ideas on a human – not business – level."

Elisabeth Kongsmark, observing the project on behalf of City Hall, felt there were four major ideas that gained the attention of the politicians: the idea of creating space for experimenting and learning; the idea of combining computer games with education; the need to put Copenhagen on the international videogame map, perhaps with some kind of festival or event; and the idea of nurturing a creative environment in the city. "What the politicians will decide to act on in the end, I do not know. Time will tell," she says.

The videogame industry at the beating heart of a creative, forward-looking European capital city? In today's climate, that's serious progress.



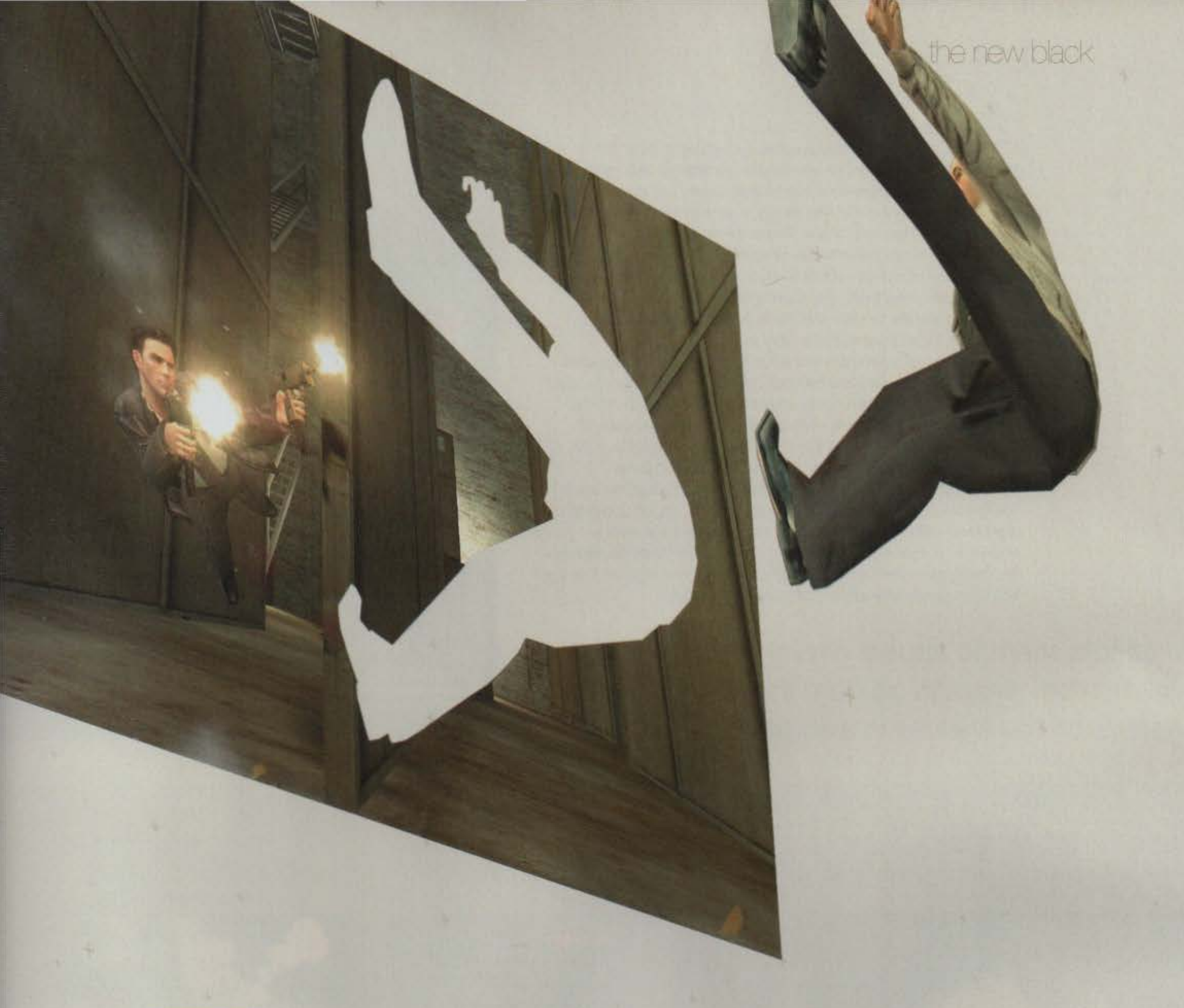
Boomtown is a thoroughly modern, dedicated gaming café in the very centre of Copenhagen, its facilities and atmosphere putting many similar UK efforts to shame





SPRING-SUMMER 1997
Lens flare / Turok: Dinosaur Hunter

SPRING-SUMMER 2000
Cel shading / Jet Set Radio



The new black

One moment a single hyped game boasts an eye-catching new coding or stylistic technique, the next you can't strafe an inch without bumping into it. But how do these revolutions happen? **Edge** seeks the answers

Max Payne wakes to find himself in hospital. Clambering out of bed, he sends a tray of medical equipment flying. As he staggers through the wards the destruction continues, with screens and machines clattering to the floor.

It's an arresting beginning. The breakthrough simulated real-world physics in *Max Payne 2* imbue Payne's woozy return to consciousness with an immediacy that an inanimate 3D world could never manage.

However, even when Payne recovers his senses, the world continues to lose it. Max can pick off thugs from 50 paces, but he can barely cross an office without a potted plant falling over. The ragdoll system that has bodies cartwheeling through the air from grenade blasts provides some much-needed variety for this relentless if remorseful killing machine, but Max's paranoia seems justified when whole warehouses appear piled high with stuff just for him to knock down, or when his foes banter obliviously in front of switch-activated and physically modelled battering rams.

Even if befuddled Payne could somehow slip from this dystopian world to take his chances in another upcoming shooter, he'd find no release. This is the year the physics cost/benefit equation is finally resolved, with *Half-Life 2*, *Halo 2* and *Doom III* all showcasing new physics systems – and no doubt equally labouring the point (id Software is already demoing *Doom III* with a butchered marine realistically swinging upside down from a rope, spurting blood).

In short, physics has arrived in games in traditional fashion. The technology is almost overnight becoming standard issue, and in many cases it will be inappropriately or sub-optimally used – just as everything from parallax scrolling and bilinear filtering to cel shading was when it debuted. Sometimes, as in bilinear filtering, the arrival is down to new hardware that makes the technique computationally realistic or even effortless. In cel shading's case it's as much a fashion thing, albeit aided by more powerful hardware. Very occasionally, as with physics, a key software vendor plays a role – *Max Payne 2*, *Halo 2* and *Half-Life 2* all incorporate the off-the-shelf Havok physics API.

"It's often only a perception that things appear overnight," says **Chris Kingsley**, technical director at Rebellion. "How many times have you heard that an actor is an instant success, only to find they've been plying their trade for years? It is no different with games. Loads of effects seem to appear overnight, but in reality they've taken many years to go from the first grain of an idea to appear on the shelves in a shipped game."

The underlying power available to programmers is typically the crucial determinant. Many graphics techniques, for example, are first pioneered by academics – often not even in realtime. Eventually the same effect is achievable on consumer-level entertainment hardware. "Once the hardware technology has certain features or reaches a certain level of power, then the doors – or perhaps floodgates – are open," Kingsley adds.

Loads of effects seem to appear overnight, but in reality they've taken many years to go from the first grain of an idea to appear on the shelves in a shipped game.


Xbox *Halo 2* is one of a number of upcoming titles expected to have real-world physics engines surpassing those seen at present

Big break: cel shading

Mark Baker, lead programmer, Climax (but worked on PS2 cel shading at SCEE a few years ago)




The Wind Waker (GameCube, 2002)

"Cel shading is interesting because it seems to have been developed independently by a number of people at the same time, although it's possible that they were all inspired by Siggraph papers and shaders for Max and Maya.

"*Jet Set Radio* was one of the first games to make heavy use of cel shading, although *Zelda: The Wind Waker* is probably the best known, for its departure from the previous games. Cartoon-esque and stylised rendering have long been attractive goals for developers, and the increased power of the PS2-generation consoles expanded the developer's creative freedom to encompass them. There have been a couple of refinements to the original shading techniques, but the main improvements in cel shading have come from a greater understanding of the differing styles that can be created. As with all visual effects, cel shading must be carefully tailored to enhance rather than detract from the visual style.

"Ultimately, I'd like to ditch the term cel shading in favour of the more general 'NPR' – non-photorealistic rendering. NPR is a more accurate description of what games require. For games like *Splinter Cell*, realism is appropriate and improves the game experience. For many others, a more stylised rendering is desirable. This should not mean simply aping cartoons, but rather developing a unique visual identity for each game.

"*XIII* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* are both excellent examples of the maturation of NPR techniques. In both, the rendering techniques are – quite correctly – secondary to the overall style and 'look'."



While new hardware is typically a factor in such debuts, it's sometimes as much a 'craze', albeit technologically supported, that sees a particular 'look' take off. "One example that springs to mind is lens flare on the N64," recalls **Steve Ellis** of Free Radical Design, who first noticed the effect in *Turok*. "At one time it seemed that every new game had to one-up all previous games by increasing the complexity of their lens flare effect."

Nowadays, lens flare is more subtly employed. The technique was always somewhat bizarre, an effect replicating one which occurs in camera lenses sitting oddly within firstperson shooter games. Over time, developers have toned it down to become a more realistic 'sun glare' effect.

Another effect that Ellis says has gone through the same transition is motion blur, which first made its presence clear in the early PlayStation2 title *IQ Remix*. This is typical of new effects – once they've spread through the current flock of games faster than Asian flu and are, in marketing terms, more a 'tick box' item than a unique selling point, developers can start figuring out how to sensibly employ the new effect rather than just squeezing it in regardless.

The CD-ROM example

Perhaps the classic example of game developers losing their senses when gifted with new technology came with the advent of CD-ROM in the mid-'90s. Suddenly freed from the storage limitations that had previously dogged games, developers rushed to 'exploit' the medium by stuffing the discs with extraneous rubbish – not so much a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater as drowning it in a swimming pool.

"It's interesting how the industry feels the need to max out on any storage space, or exploit any new technology, before asking if it's actually necessary for the art's sake," says **James Hannigan**, the BAFTA-nominated composer currently scoring Elixir Studio's *Evil Genius*. "In terms of game music, this might mean 'filling' the CD – or now DVD – by recording the largest imaginable orchestra, or mixing music in 5.1 – whether or not this is really enhancing."

Now In2Games marketing director, but formerly MD of mid-'90s developer Pure Entertainment, **Harry Holmwood** well remembers the debilitating effect that CD-ROM's arrival had on games: the CDi and 3DO console shoot 'em ups where the prerendered backdrops streaming off the CD looked gorgeous until you realised the enemy ships were part of the

Big break: texture mapping

Glenn Corpes, technical director, Climax London



"After moving from the Amiga to the PC around 1992, I was playing with polygon routines – the lovely byte-per-pixel modes on VGA cards made it so easy – and I worked out how to achieve Gouraud shading.

"I was feeling pretty smug about this until I saw screenshots of *Ultima Underworld* that completely floored me – they were wrapping textures around everything. That seemed like an incredible achievement at the time, even in that tiny window. It took me a while to realise that it was, in a way, just 2D Gouraud shading. *Ultima Underworld* went on to inspire me to create the graphic engine for *Magic Carpet* which in its own small way featured a few innovations of its own like variable translucency, animating geometry, reflections and, erm, rather too much fog…

"Texture mapping enabled a huge jump ahead in the richness of early 3D games. PC hardware started supporting it directly by around 1995, and it was the only sensible way to get anything looking good on the PlayStation.

"The power of those machines meant that developers were working with tiny numbers of polygons. A spaceship that was barely more than a few tetrahedrons stuck together looked a hell of a lot better with a bit of detail drawn on the sides.

"I'd be surprised if there is anything that will make the impact that texture mapping did again."


Magic Carpet (PC, 1994)

Big break: slow motion effects

Chris Kingsley, technical director, Rebellion



"I have seen many techniques that get used in a lot of games once someone pioneered them first. One that springs to mind, and it's close to my heart, is the slow motion effect.

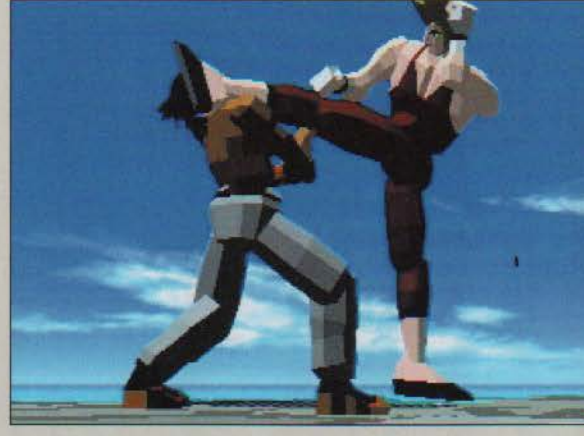
"We first used this in *Aliens Vs Predator* on the PC as a bonus for good players – we called it John Woo mode in tribute to the master filmmaker who inspired us. We used it principally because the game speed of *Aliens Vs Predator* was so fast that often the player would miss something. We had facial expressions and character emotions, and the player could shoot off individual body parts from the Aliens, but a lot of people did not appreciate them because of the game's relentless pace.

"We were pleased to see the effect appear later in other titles, with some games even focusing their whole gameplay on it. The growing popularity of Hong Kong-style action movies made by the likes of John Woo and the Hollywood movies they inspired, such as 'The Matrix', have made slow motion effects popular everywhere.

"I am pretty happy that we got it right first time. Not only did we slow time visually but we also slowed time audibly. We slowed time when the player came face to face with an enemy; later developments have seen slow motion more under the control of the player with a few more effects, but not significantly modified from our initial work."



Aliens Vs Predator (PC, 1999)



Saturn *Virtua Fighter*. Instead of generating true 3D polygons, Sega's console twisted 2D sprites to the required shape. This used less processing power, but was not a method 3D programmers were familiar with at the time

backdrop too, with explosions simply being drawn over them as they scrolled off-screen; or the peripheral-based game *Mad Dog McCree*, where your brain had wait to wait for the nascent technology to catch up. "In *McCree* you used a lightgun to shoot a cowboy," remembers Holmwood. "Only problem was that when you shot him the disk whirred for a few seconds, and then you'd see him clutch his chest and fall over! It rather ruined the illusion." It seems ridiculous now, but in the days before huge textures, developers didn't really know what else to do with – or indeed have much need for – the CD's capacity.

"I worked on what started off as a floppy disk game but was later changed to CD-ROM – the latest thing," Holmwood says. "It was an incredibly dull hardcore naval warfare simulation – all radar screens and 'blip!' noises, designed for the obsessive war nut.

"Once it became CD-ROM we had another 649Mb to fill. As well as the radar screen – where absolutely all the gameplay took place – we had to enable you to walk around your ship, go to your cabin, have a cup of tea – seriously – and then walk back to your screen and start looking at the little boat icons again. Then we had to add cut-scenes, so that when a ship launched a missile, a little window would pop up showing it launching. Then we added story cut-scenes.

"All this stuff was very pretty and it probably added to the sales as people just wanted pretty things to show off their CD-ROM drives, but it added absolutely nothing to the game. It was like having a line of monkeys dancing around the speedometer on your car."

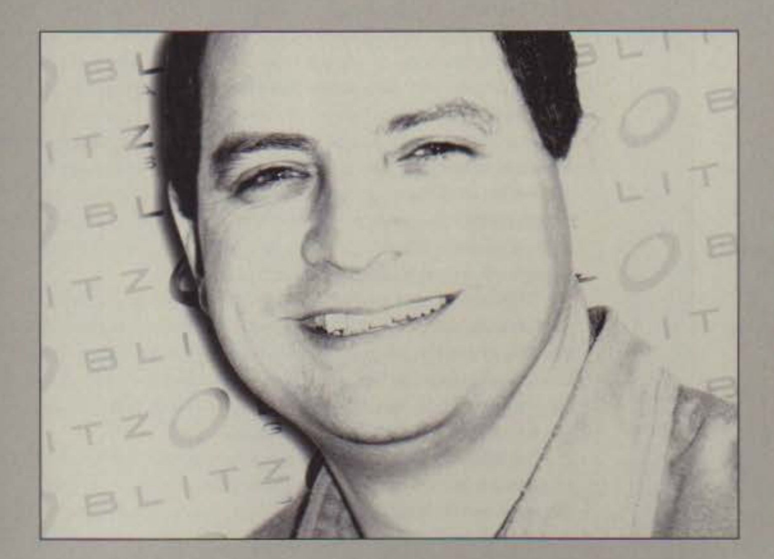
Even worse is if a new technology or craze stifles creativity, especially if it becomes embedded in hardware or software such as Microsoft's DirectX API. (The latter was a particular concern for id Software's John Carmack in the late '90s.) While **Glenn Corpes**, technical director of Climax London, understands, partook in and applauds the rise of hardware texture mapping, he also sees the downside. Artists quickly started using fewer polygons and turned to bigger textures instead, aided by a new generation of 3D modelling packages that were increasingly targeting game character design. By the time 3D had irrevocably taken over from 2D in games, almost every 3D game used texture mapping.

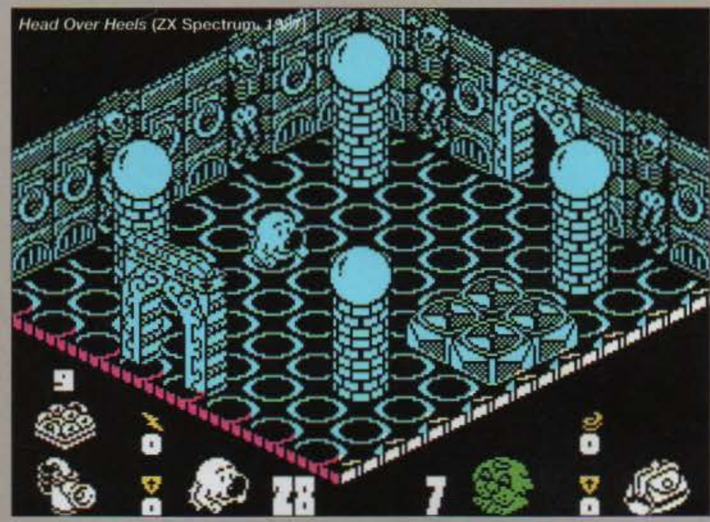
"In some ways this was a shame," Corpes says. "If texture mapping had never made it into hardware, we'd maybe have more innovative graphics systems today as programmers could use more creativity. We'd be seeing far more stylised games, rather than everything being an attempt at photorealism apart from a few cel-shaded exceptions."

"I remember being at the event when Sega announced the Saturn and described how it could only draw warped sprite things rather than textured triangles. A gasp echoed around the hall. I was amazed that there were so many 3D programmers in the room who instantly grasped the significance of this. Of course, a little later the details of the original PlayStation were released and a lot of people loved the way it worked because it was fairly familiar. I have a theory that this

Big break: isometric 3D

Philip Oliver, CEO, Blitz Games





Head Over Heels (ZX Spectrum, 1987)

"One thing I remember kicking off in a big way in the early Spectrum and Amstrad days were isometric games. Once Sandy White and Angela Sutherland broke it in on *Ant Attack*, it popped up all over the place in games like *Head Over Heels* and *Match Day*, and in a lot of Ultimate's output.

"We used it in our *Spindizzy*-clone *Incredible Shrinking Sphere* and we also made the most of it in *Ghostbusters II*.

"The isometric perspective gave an illusion of 3D that we'd simply not seen before. There were so many technical limitations back then that if anyone worked out how to do something new, we were all using it. The only problem was that every new game for a while looked the same, and it got boring very quickly.

"The other problem was that it just made everything run so damn slowly – that and the fact that the 'attribute clash' problems on the Spectrum meant that the whole room would have to be one colour, and your main character would be really difficult to see. Controls were tricky too because it takes a bit of getting used to pressing 'up' when you actually want to go 'up-and-left'. The advent of the ST and the Amiga brought joystick control as standard, though, so movement around an isometric 3D level became much more intuitive. Add to that an increased colour range and a little more processing power and we were all able to make it work a bit better.

"With the advent of the PlayStation and 3D graphics cards for PCs, isometric level design largely came to an end as we realised we could do 3D for real. It lives on in some Game Boy games, but otherwise it's now a fairly obsolete idea."

was a factor in the relative successes of the two machines."

Much more common than the wholesale shifts initiated by texture mapping or CD-ROMs are faddish examples of Holmwood's 'dancing monkeys'. For example, to play certain early PlayStation games like *Loaded* and *Tunnel B1*,or PC titles like *Terracide* or *Forsaken*, is to enter a funfair of red and green lights emitted from seemingly every wall, vehicle and weapon. Programmers could suddenly implement Gouraud-shaded polygons, so they did. Repeatedly. It was also around this time that numerous game menus turned 3D – until developers realised such menus added nothing but development time to their projects.

Similarly, the image bloom effects of *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time* and *Wreckless* could look rather hackneyed in a few years time, reckons Argonaut's senior programmer **Warrick Buchanan**, as will the overuse of environment mapping. "The vending machines in *Soldier Of Fortune* stick out in my mind," he says. "They were predominantly flat, and due to the approximation that environment mapping uses to work they looked crap – it is best used on surfaces that are far from flat."

To be so aware of the transitory impact of groundbreaking special effects is not to deride them. The promise of something new – even just eye candy – is one of gaming's core engines, and today's dancing monkeys are tomorrow's stalwart frontier-expanding munitions. Besides, without gaudily tempting fireworks, hardware manufacturers would struggle to upgrade gamers to new generations of ultimately superior hardware.

Having created sufficiently powerful silicon, console and 3D chip manufacturers rely on game programmers to sell their feature-sets to gamers. The best example of this came with the 3D accelerator boom in the mid-'90s. Ultimately, the winners triumphed due to a combination of courting developer support and hardware superiority – 3Dfx's Voodoo

The promise of something new – even just eye candy – is one of gaming's core engines. Without tempting fireworks, hardware manufacturers would struggle to upgrade gamers to new generations of hardware.



***Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time*'s lighting effects and 'smoothed-out' look could appear terribly dated once the techniques employed become commonplace throughout the industry, reckons Argonaut's Warrick Buchanan**

Big break: CD music

John Broomhall, independent audio director. A veteran of several dozen games, he recently worked on *Pop Idol*



"The ability to replay CD tracks in games was an overnight phenomenon brought about by the introduction of disc-based delivery. Arguably, it constitutes both a blessing and a curse.

"Suddenly, high or even medium fidelity was king, compared with the foibles and limitations of hardware replay – the so-called 'chip music'. And yet that FM sound in games past did, somehow, seem to belong.

"In the wake of *Wipeout*, marketing directors across the industry hounded audio directors to include licensed tracks. Meanwhile, wannabe film composers within games were able to show off their musical and production chops.

"Did we get better game music? Well, for sure we got better-sounding game music. However, the application of linear tracks in an interactive medium has presented some fundamental conundrums that few have really had the patience, vision, time and budget to address.

"Over time I expect music composition and delivery to become more sophisticated. This is still a relatively new medium, and I am intrigued to see how composers will address the challenges of a non-linear medium: linear tracks have served their purpose; interactive MIDI based systems don't sound good enough to the DVD generation; and all our references are from film – the previous 'artform.'"



Wipeout (PS1, 1995)

Graphics having not just the hardware bilinear filtering that would-be rivals like Videologic's PowerVR PCX 1 lacked, but also being much easier for coders to show off on thanks to its much-loved pre-DirectX API Glide. "The hardware guys go to great lengths to make their technology enable cool stuff, but they need games programmers to bring this to the wider gaming public," explains Kingsley. "I attend a lot of technical conferences for graphics and sound, and I often see the same techniques demonstrated almost simultaneously on new hardware from different manufacturers. This acts as a catalyst for many effects that will appear later in games."

There's plenty to look forward to – the evolution of game technology will continue like this for the foreseeable future. Kuju's technical director **Adrian Hawkins** foresees the standardisation of anisotropic and other filtering techniques in hardware, and also looks forward to the maturation of programmable hardware pixel shaders and custom lighting techniques on next-generation consoles. "Look out for decent BRDF lighting, high dynamic range and spherical harmonics," he predicts.

"The *Doom III* style of generating bump maps from high polygon models looks set to stay for the foreseeable future, even though it increases the scale of content production somewhat," reckons Buchanan. "You can see this being extended into generating displacement maps and various other things for nice per-pixel self-shadowing surfaces, and view dependent parallax effects with more complex lighting functions."

Developers are also busy maximising the technological breakthroughs of yesterday. Audio channels, for example, have exploded during the past five years and 3D audio is now common, but the result has too often been a thoughtless cacophony as the soundscape has been simply stuffed with multiple effects and music. "In development terms, there is less of a problem and more of a solution – but arguably enough rope to hang ourselves with creatively," is how audio veteran **John Broomhall** puts it. "I can't help feeling that the potential artistry of game sound that goes way beyond the literal is largely yet to come."

It a similar story with programming – the big changeover to 3D is far behind us and the programming template is set, for now, but developers continue to push it. Remember when Shiny boasted of (and attempted to



Big break: bilinear filtering

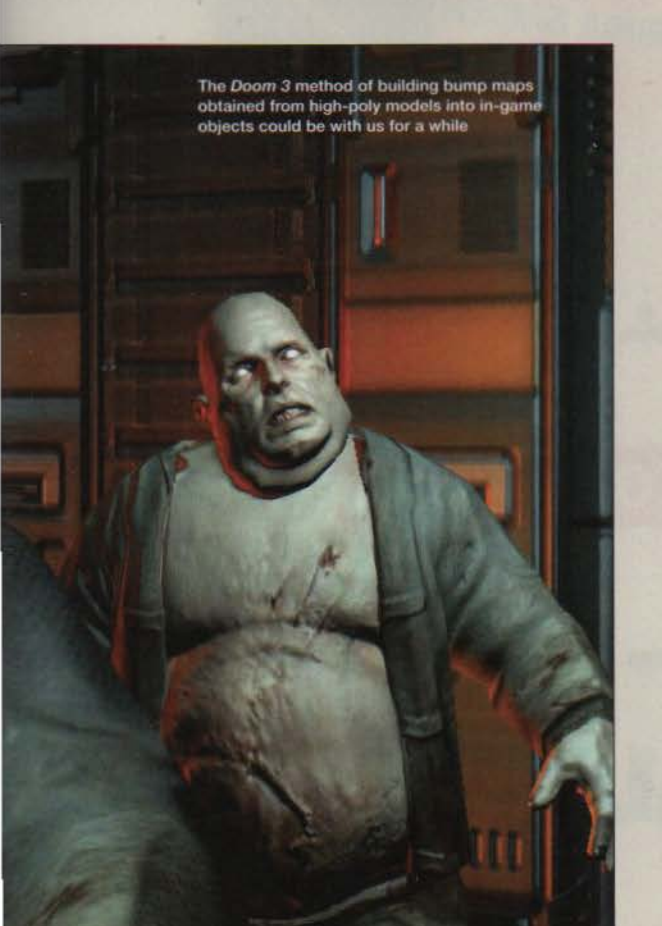
Adrian Hawkins, technical director, Kuju Action




Quake 2 (PC, 1997)

"Bilinear filtering in hardware appeared in 3D games in around 1996, and has been used in just about every 3D game ever since. It came about with the advent of 3D accelerator cards on the PC. These cards performed the filtering operation in hardware, at little or no extra cost, and gave a marked increase in visual quality over point sampling (as seen in software-rasterised games of the time), which typically had a very pixelated look.

"Video RAM was limited, upload costs were high and therefore textures had to be low resolution. Over time, increased texture resolution – through compression techniques or just more memory – has led to less of the 'blurry' effects that are common with linear filtering. Better texture mapping tools and art techniques have also enabled more even and optimal texel resolutions – for example, distant scenery which the player cannot get close to can be of a lower resolution, whereas the foreground needs a higher resolution. A more unique look to games has also started to emerge through better lighting."


The *Doom 3* method of building bump maps obtained from high-poly models into in-game objects could be with us for a while

"We'll see designers being able to throw down huge forests, scatter debris on the ground in a ruined city and build objects out of truly textured surfaces"

patent) the realtime tessellation in *Messiah*? Now level-of-detail schemes are just the latest technology to shift into the background as a crucial and ubiquitous engine workhorse: "We'll see designers being able to throw down huge forests, scatter debris on the ground in a ruined city and build objects out of truly textured surfaces, all of which will use thousands of polygons in the foreground while using only tens of them in the distance," explains Corpes. "Of course very few people will realise it's happening – which is as it should be."

Ultimately, technology that debuts with a bang ends not in a whimper but in assimilation. The physics of *Max Payne 2* are obtrusive now partly because they are somewhat overused, but also because of the novelty. Reviews in a few years' time are unlikely to mention the more mundane aspects of physics, except where it goes wrong.

"If older entertainment industries are anything to go by, the term 'artform' only tends to get used when any associated technology or production tools have become so widespread, and their use so transparent, that they become merely a means to an end," says Hannigan. "A parallel with the film industry might be the introduction of Cinemascope, leading to the creation of numerous biblical epics which were, in some cases, cynical attempts to exploit the new technology, brought into existence because the studios were worried about the widespread introduction of TV.

"Most of those films aren't exactly considered to be the best in film history, and I think few of us would even think of the film industry as an industry of 'technology' any more. Will this happen in games?"

The world's most respected videogame reviews

Edge's review policy

Every issue, **Edge** evaluates the best, most interesting, hyped, innovative or promising games on a scale of ten, where five naturally represents the middle value. **Edge**'s rating system is fair, progressive and balanced. An average game deserves an average mark – not, as many believe, seven out of ten. Scores broadly correspond to the following sentiments: zero: nothing, one: disastrous, two: appalling, three: severely flawed, four: disappointing, five: average, six: competent, seven: distinguished, eight: excellent, nine: astounding, ten: revolutionary.

Edge's most played

Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic

(PC/Xbox) Bioware

You know those times when you're trying really hard to lean toward the light side, but then you blurt something out and get dark side points for it? We do.



Samba de Amigo

(DC) Sega

The arrival of some fresh maracas (originals broken after one too many party sessions) brought an old favourite out to play again this month. Shakealicious.



Thief

(PC) Looking Glass

Still spectacularly immersive and unnerving even when you know it by heart, and the closing cut-scene can nearly reduce one **Edge** staffer to tears. Wimp.



Call Of Duty



Just what you need when you've been forced to fret over comrades in so many squad-based shooters – an eager and seemingly never-ending supply of them.



Three become one

It ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it

The firstperson shooter is dead. The thirdperson action adventure is dead. Long live the new genres, free from clumsy double-barrelled classification. It's not that simple, of course, but there's a movement afoot in videogames – a movement you can view from the angle of your choosing.

Last month, we reviewed *Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes*, which saw Snake return to Shadow Moses with fresh eyes provided by *MGS2*'s firstperson mode. This month, the trend continues, with *Thief: Deadly Shadows* (p59), *The Suffering* (p41) and *Transformers* (p94) all offering a choice of play perspectives.

Which is nothing revolutionary in itself: driving games and flight sims have provided players with a choice of in-vehicle firstperson and thirdperson chase-cam views for years. Elsewhere, the presentation of a videogame has become entwined with our understanding of it. They urgently need a new taxonomy to tease out assumptions of old styles and accommodates new inventions.

Sensible videogame cataloguing sees perspective as divorced from play style – first/third/topdown as a separate consideration from the game's main focus of shooting, exploring or negotiating. For our tenth anniversary, we did away with the category of FPS altogether, spreading the standout titles across adventure, shooter and strategy whatever the viewpoint.

Now, more flexible and informed game design is forcing that change. The purpose of perspective choice in *The Suffering* is to allow the player to ratchet up the tension on their own terms, rather than the arbitrary slasher flick conventions of a fixed camera. *Transformers* utilises firstperson to add variety to the control mechanic, introducing a subtle stealth mode to compliment the pounding intensity of the action. *Deadly Shadows* allows you to draw back from Garret's claustrophobic eyeline to appreciate that he is a physical part of the *Thief* world.

We look forward to a time when the importance of a game is measured in what the player can see and achieve in it, not how they look at it from the outside. Baroque acronyms and self-conscious pigeonholing will hardly endear newcomers – "*Deus Ex*? It's a firstperson shooter-stealth-action-hybrid with RPG bits." It's a good game, too. Whichever way you want to look at it.





096







Transformers

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Atari** Developer: **Melbourne House** Price: **£35** Release: **May 11**



Can you make out that distant glimmer on the island? That's a Minicon, and once you've reached it, chances are your vantage point will give you a glimpse of another. It's impossible to resist their lure



Since when did childhood franchises improve with age? The invention of the Minicons, micro-Transformers which bolt on to their big brothers like death-dealing accessories, provided Melbourne House not only with a plot for its big robot love-in – rescue the little fellas before the Decepticons enslave them – but also with a ingenious game mechanic. Discovering new Minicons drives your exploration through the game, and configuring the sets of four that each main Transformer can support provides the tactical heart of an otherwise traditional thirdperson blaster.

The Transformers at your disposal are not necessarily the ones that set your childhood heart aflame, but each has its advantages. Hot Shot offers a different take on stealth. At a hundred miles an hour, he can tear through enemy lines faster than they can get a bead on him. Once familiar with a level, you can run rings – if not donuts – around your beefed-up opponents.

Red Alert, with his tougher defences, makes himself useful for recces, although you'll never quite shift the embarrassment of his SUV form. Optimus, inevitably, remains the king. The most handsome of the models, his higher Energon rating means he gives you the best chance to play with combinations of the more intriguing Minicons. And he turns into a truck. One of Melbourne House's defences for the small number of characters is that each has alternate modes.

Once transformed, driving is a no-frills affair, but is solid and pleasing. Glider handling, after being changed in almost every iteration of the game released to the press, has been simplified for the finished version. It loses a little of its precarious freedom, but does a much more reliable job of getting you where you want to go. It's certainly the only point when you'll be cursing the PS2's flabby sticks. For the purposes of running and clusterbombing, Melbourne House has coaxed an unrivalled satisfaction and control out of the DualShock. Fighting is made even more rewarding by the smart and varied enemies. Moving quickly to flank you or unleashing awkward ankle-biting EMP attacks, they create battles that have as much frantic as tactic.

Impressively, Melbourne House has managed to convey the Transformers' bulk and mass with every thudding step they take. Pina colada sunlight flares off every immaculately worn corner of your steel frame, and the joystick gives a little rhythmic tremble as your feet eat up yards of the vast terrain at a time. Taking Optimus down Aztec corridors designed on a human scale feels magnificently clunky and boorish.

The flipside of this marvellously monolithic character design is the inclusion of inexplicable and frustrating platforming sections. These are rare and usually brief, but that won't stop them from interrupting the flow of your game. The iron slabs of Transformer feet weren't designed for precision landing on icy slopes, and getting blasted back down the bottom of a tedious climb makes you all too likely to hit restart to get back to an elevated checkpoint. The other curious decision is the massively exaggerated ragdoll effect triggered when you take a tumble or a hit. Waiting through those few seconds while your Transformer







Allowing for the nature of the franchise, the quality of the cut-scenes was key. They deliver both beauty and class

Previously in **E**129, **E**131















The downside of the spectacular weapons and the dramatic effects is that in the heat of pitched battle the screen can become totally – and lastingly – obscured with smoke. Firstperson mode, available throughout the game, slows you to a stealthy creep and allows for high precision shooting

flops around like an dislocated puppet wears thin after the first few dozen times, and entirely undermines the solidity that the animation, sound and rumble has given to the characters.

What will stop you in your tracks is the scale, detail and beauty of the environments. Even after repeated play it's impossible not to pause and breathe in the magnificent view from the top of the Deep Amazon temple. Not only does *Transformers* not look like a PS2 game, it doesn't even look like a second-generation PS2 game. Sony's third age may have started a few years early.

Sadly, the spectacle isn't quite matched by the level design. Some sections are cleverly conceived – dense wooded plains, trenches and switchbacks, corridor sections which affectionately pastiche mindless FPS blasters – but others are unfocused, wasted opportunities. Revisiting is never a chore, however, and thanks to the high visibility of warp gates and Minicon locations, mopping up is a fast and satisfying adventure.

These Minicons become more and more inventive. Beyond high-powered cannons, sniper scopes and grenade launchers, some coat you in a damaging film of electricity that hurts anything you touch. Combine this with a heavy shield and a boosted melee attack, and you're equipped to fight down and truly dirty. However, you may find yourself relying on only a few, leaving the others languishing in your big metal wardrobe. The slightly cumbersome process of returning to HQ and reconfiguring further discourages any experimentation with the bolt-ons.

Also disappointing are the boss fights, which are your only chance to face the real Decepticons. Despite a marvellous premise – the battles can range over entire levels as both combatants transform back and forth –

Even after repeated play it's impossible not to pause and breathe in the magnificent view from the top of the Deep Amazon temple

they are far less convincing than the rest of the game. Frustrating and awkward in places, boring and repetitive in others, their main worth lies in the sumptuous FMV sequences they trigger.

It's these flaws that stop *Transformers* coming closer to glory. As it is, the game stands tall as an irresistibly involving adventure, and as a testament to an unusually talented, disciplined and imaginative development team. Twenty-two feet tall, at that.

Edge rating: Eight out of ten



Vehicle mode allows you to ram opponents – a high-speed melee attack that scatters lighter Decepticlones

Legend of Zelda: Four Swords+

Format: **GC** Publisher: **Nintendo** Developer: **Capcom** Price: **¥6,800 (£35)** Release: **Out now (Japan) TBC (UK)**









One of *Four Swords*' triumphs – and you're spoilt for choice to pick one – is its assured adaptability. Unlike many other multiplayer titles, you'll seldom feel that you're getting anything less than the full experience, regardless of head count. Although more is inarguably merrier during Tingle's horse racing (top)

Every single moment of *Four Swords* is magically familiar and every single moment is dazzlingly fresh. Put simply, it's everything you hoped it would be: a rambunctious multiplayer adventure; an utterly absorbing singleplayer epic; a testament to Nintendo's detailed affection for its own history and a manifesto for how it can ensure its vibrant, inventive future.

The game is so much the thing in *Four Swords* that it feels almost disloyal to turn away from it to technical considerations, but there's a lot to explain, all of it elegantly implemented. The main game, *Hyrule Adventure*, is an entirely new, classically presented 2D *Zelda* adventure. For one to four players, there are dungeons with dastardly bosses and delicate puzzles and overground sections with disgruntled villagers and infested forests. By no means a cut-down version of its predecessors, the game can be saved at the end of every level. When restarting, you can reselect the number of players, allowing the single and multiplayer experiences to slot in and out of each other. There are always four Links on screen – those not assigned to a controller will tag along after another player, and can be commanded to assume formations.

> If someone's picking on you, then pick back. Squash them with your hammer, ping them with your boomerang and fence them in with bombs



Singleplayer mode sees the entire brace of Links under your control. Juggling formations allows you to solve puzzles

Multiplayer requires GBAs and link-up cables, and these are worked to their full. Whenever a player enters a cave or a house, their character disappears from the main screen and pops up on the GBA. This allows the other characters to continue their action on the main screen while you explore the nooks and crannies at your leisure. The scaling 2D screen allows characters to wander at will, zooming in and out to accommodate their exploration. When you want to move to the next screen you'll all need to congregate together – and if someone won't play ball or needs the bathroom, then just pick their Link up and carry them onto the next screen. This is the strength of *Four Swords*: the game trusts you – it trusts you to want to work together, and it trusts you to want to do the messing around.

Throughout the game, team players will compete for rupees, running each other off narrow ledges and setting fire to other Links to get to the treasure first. Any Link who dies drops all their rupees, and other players have a few seconds to grab them before they're automatically revived. If someone's picking on you, then pick back. Squash them with your hammer, ping them with your boomerang and fence them in with bombs. Then someone will discover a likely-looking switch and all animosity is forgotten as you tackle the next brain-twister. Many of the puzzles are formation based, requiring co-ordination from team players or the flick of a button in singleplayer to turn the Links you lead into deadly Red Devils. As well as being visually delightful, the spatial thinking they require is a new twist to the canon, and will keep *Zelda* veterans from becoming too complacent.

All this ingenuity is just the plumbing. Whether being experienced in the competitive, co-operative cackle of multiplay, or the captivating atmosphere of singleplayer, the extraordinary virtues of the game itself remain the same. Foremost is its beauty. The warm maroons and creamy greens of *A Link to the Past* make a return, but wreathed with

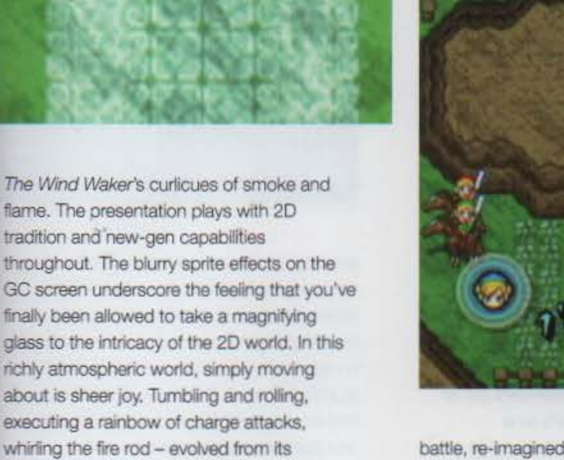
Previously in E119, E125, E126, E132













Subtle but marvellous effects complement the 2D backgrounds with careful understatement. It's a typically knowing Nintendo take on the concept of a 'retro update' and oozes quality

The Wind Waker's curlicues of smoke and flame. The presentation plays with 2D tradition and new-gen capabilities throughout. The blurry sprite effects on the GC screen underscore the feeling that you've finally been allowed to take a magnifying glass to the intricacy of the 2D world. In this richly atmospheric world, simply moving about is sheer joy. Tumbling and rolling, executing a rainbow of charge attacks, whirling the fire rod – evolved from its functional past to a rococo flamethrower – around your head, this game milks exuberance from you at every step.

This is the basis on which the continual wonder of *Four Swords* is built. Every new use of the world on your GBA will delight you, every impossible-seeming puzzle will dissolve into inevitable clarity. Every well-known face and half-remembered tune amplifies the game's dense atmosphere. Every boss battle, re-imagined to make the most out of the game's quartet of Links, will amaze you. Every mini-game, made available courtesy of the loopy Tingle, will remind you of happy hours whiled away in Hyrule and Lon-Lon. To explain any of them here would rob potential players of one of those moments of familiar magic and fresh dazzle, and this magazine is no such thief.

Edge rating: Nine out of ten



Importing = piracy

And that's only a third of what is on offer. As well as an ingenious kind of deathmatch-lite, the Japanese edition includes the manic dash-and-grab of *Tetra's Trackers*, where the minxy pirate captain keeps up a stream of deliciously shrill encouragement, calling out to players by the names they've entered. The impossibility of translating this system means that Nintendo have all but confirmed it won't be included in the US and PAL versions. Those who want their pirate kicks are advised to import.

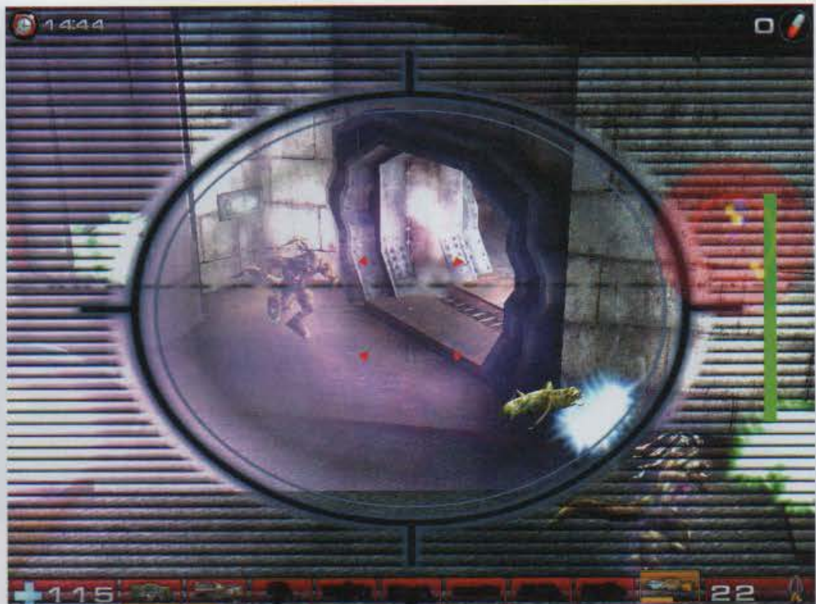
Unreal Tournament 2004

Format: **PC** Publisher: **Infogrames** Developer: **Epic/Digital** Price: **£35** Release: **Out now**





The Invasion battle mode is the rare example of a purely co-operative shooter, with players pitched against waves of aggressive aliens





The '2003' raised eyebrows. When the world was waiting for a sequel to one of the first true multiplayer-centric commercial games, the moniker it expected was *'Unreal Tournament 2'*. The year rather than the iteration implied something entirely different, that rather than seeing their competitive firstperson online shooters in the traditional game lineage of sequel begetting sequel begetting sequel, they saw them in the mould of Electronic Arts sports games.

An *Unreal Tournament 2003* therefore implied an *Unreal Tournament 2004*, a *2005* and so on and so on.

While *UT2003* was well received, if a little overshadowed by *Battlefield 1942* giving the genre's paradigm a swift vehicle-obsessed kick, it wasn't there that Epic's true success could really be judged. In an infinite chain it isn't the first link you judge – it's the movement onwards. In other words, this is the important one. Can a non-sports game really operate like this?

Unreal Tournament 2004 seems to suggest it can, at least for now. While still very much in the same vein, the improvements are so varied, polished and deep to make any devotee of the genre consider upgrading. In fact, its range is extensive enough make those who turned their nose up at the business-as-usual nature of *UT2003* come storming back.

While there are large changes, it's the overflowing bounty *UT2004* offers which impresses. The worst impression yearly-style updates can give you is seeming mean, and this is anything but. All the old maps and game modes for *UT2003* are present but with the total number of maps for them more than doubled, and this isn't even counting the two new major game modes introduced.

First, Assault makes a welcome return. Sadly missing from *UT2003*, this sees a mixture of new maps and reworked ones from the original *UT*. Levels of this type are defined by their sense of narrative progression rather than the somewhat abstract nature of some of the more traditional level sorts. The assaulting team must accomplish a series of objectives while the defender attempts to stop them. If the attackers succeed the clock is stopped, the positions reverse and the defenders get an attempt to beat the attacker's time. Traditional problems with this map type – namely first-time players having no clue what to do next – are diverted in impressive style, with objectives marked clearly in the player's view to allow easy orientation.

An entirely new diversion are the Onslaught mode maps, which play across generally expansive levels and essentially work like *Halo*, and especially *Planetside*. A series of nodes lie between each side's base, and a pathway must be captured from one to the other before it can be destroyed and victory claimed. Its stroke of genius is that rather than having any node a possible takeover target at any time, a team requires an adjacent node on the grid from which to launch their assault. This creates a structure that lets conflicts ebb and flow in an organic and tactically exciting manner.

It also helps that they're the maps that give most precedence to the single biggest addition to the game: vehicles. While not having the sheer variety of *Battlefield 1942*, what they do possess is a mixture of admirable variety and genuine imagination. While jeeps might be considered passé to the jaded palette of a firstperson shooter veteran, ones which alongside their more standard gun-based armament possess a





Vehicle control is accessible and powerful. It's also more forgiving of mistakes than *Battlefield 1942*'s aerial controls, leading to a reduced likelihood of embarrassing crashes











UT2004 excels in the details of interaction, such as the link guns being able to be used indirectly. Fire at a team-mate with such a weapon and the beams join force, proving especially handy in the Onslaught games

set of giant retractable blades that can be deployed to slice people asunder like Boadicea are less thick on the ground.

Of course, the sports game isn't the only precedent for regular updates of variable meaningfulness. The endless iterations of traditional 2D beat 'em ups are the other model for this sort of behaviour and, in many ways, a more relevant one. It's easy to see the online shooter as fitting into the exact same competitive, skill-based niche that the 2D fighter did – more so in these days of voice technology (which is fully integrated in this edition, incidentally), which allows a more direct experience of whining from a vanquished opponent.

While the *UT* series has always had more of a singleplayer experience than its peers, it's this release that does the most in that area. This is directly analogous to beat 'em ups which, while fully aware that the human competition is the central experience anyone buys them for, still manage to structure a series of challenges to entertain solo players.

This is added by a team-management section that echoes *Speedball 2*, with you gaining finances through victories which can be spent on hiring better team-mates for the all-important team games. This sort of structure is a much welcomed addition and, with the quality of bots still the best in their field, makes this relatively desirable even for those without a net connection – something that neither ageing rival *Quake 3* nor new turk *Battlefield Vietnam* could claim.

So, a triumph, then. Which isn't to say

While still very much in the same vein, the improvements are so varied, polished and deep to make any devotee consider upgrading

Epic faces no challenges with *Unreal Tournament 2005*, *2006* and however far it chooses to follow this. So much has been added to the *UT* experience for this edition it appears almost inevitable that the next will seem a somewhat small step in comparison. You have to wish Epic the very best of luck in confounding that particular prediction, though.

Edge rating: **Eight** out of **ten**

Breed

Format: **PC** Publisher: **CDV** Developer: **Brat Studios** Price: **£30** Release: **Out now** Previously in **E**125, **E**126







While we have an affinity for avatars who possess luxuriant handlebar moustaches (right), there's not a lot to recommend here





Trouble

While an internet fracas following the release of an underwhelming game is common, it has taken a rather interesting turn with *Breed*. Ex-Brat members appear, claiming that a patch to fix some of the worst problems – for example, the almost non-functioning multiplayer on the German release – has been in CDV's hands for a month but that it hasn't yet been sent through QA. Even more amazing, CDV is accused of altering the textures from *Breed* to a less realistic hue for release. These online fisticuffs may actually be the most interesting thing related to the end product.



The game is set in a future war, after Earth has been overrun by the Breed. It's your squad's job to win the planet back from the alien invaders





Videogames lie to you. The underdog fighting against the odds won't always triumph after striving against adversity. So while we would be pleased to tell you that Newcastle-based and relatively tiny debut developer Brat Studios has managed to win against larger teams and larger budgets by realising its vision, sadly we have to report that in *Breed* it has created just another forgettable firstperson shooter.

The easiest reference point is *Halo*, but on the PC, with everything that entails. Bungie's game, despite the expansive levels, tightly controlled your flow. *Breed* offers wider panoramas, teammates who can be ordered as well as followed, weapons with a greater variety of modes and vehicles that are larger both in number and complexity. However, it brings with it the PC's traditional downsides: a limited design aesthetic, general clunkiness and lack of polish. Oh, and bugs.

While the size of levels and number of opponents look good, *Breed* fails to impress in terms of pure visual flair. This is at least partly due to its release date. Six months ago it would have been possibly acceptable, but now, with *Far Cry* catching come-hither glances from all corners, it's the plain friend everyone ignores. It doesn't help that in the areas it could excel in, such as destructible scenery, its flaws show most clearly. Experience teaches you that towers often house snipers, so you destroy them from afar. All seems fine until you discover that, through some quirk of programming, those very snipers are unharmed, and are happily levitating while returning fire.

Although clever enough to create a coherent design for the nefarious Breed which is genuinely alien, its looks aren't evocative enough to create any real sense of atmosphere. This isn't helped by the alien AI, with its repetitive roll-left/return-fire actions. Of your allies, neither the amateurish voice acting, gung-ho-by-numbers script nor often hilarious and/or fatal AI mishaps add anything.

Inspired moments, such as the vehicles' multiple weapon systems, are forced from the mind by the relentless slogs across the levels. Rather than in *Halo*, where cover, either actua or via the rechargeable shield, was the prime play element, here it's a war of attrition between the length of mission and your character's health reserves. In the end, you're likely to discover that the real battle is to continue playing.

Edge rating: Three out of ter

World War Zero

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **MC2** Developer: **Rebellion** Price: **£40** Release: **April 2** Previously in **E134**

This is one of the better firstperson shooters on PS2. So why the moderate score? First, Sony's platform has yet to be graced with a brilliant FPS with a compulsive singleplayer story. Second, *World War Zero* might work competently in all departments – the auto-aim is clever, the reticule calibration is finely judged and the framerate is rock steady – but it lacks soul and is missing a vital spark of imagination.

Take the level design. *World War Zero* has not been built to deliver anything new. It's almost as if it's been put together using an FPS construction kit, in fact. Trenches, churchyards, bombed villages, research facilities and, yes, there's even a train to negotiate. It's not even that these scenarios are clichéd (the game *is* set in a warzone, after all), it's that the building bricks making up the individual levels repeat incessantly: every room with identical furniture, every corridor with exactly the same textured wallpaper.

Kill an enemy at a gun emplacement, and guess what? You can take charge of his fixed weapon and spray a handful of scripted saps with the bullets intended for you. *World War Zero*'s failure to take risks and try something new is partly down to the fact that it's a conversion of a relatively old PC game, *Iron Storm*, but even that doesn't excuse it for being this conservative.

The enemy AI is robust if unremarkable. Soldiers duck convincingly behind walls and obstructions but fail to display the kind of organisational AI seen in games like *Halo*. Neat touches, such as injured enemies pulling suicide grenades on themselves, show a wittiness absent elsewhere, but a lack of enemy types reduces strategic nuance.

Only in the game's premise is there a sign that this yearns to be different. As the title suggests, *World War Zero* casts you into an alternate history that sees the war of 1914 stretching out into the 1960s. 'New' technology meets old in a melange that is engaging and fresh. If only that character had been transferred into the mission tasks and level construction.

Other companies looking to bring us the first killer PS2 FPS would do well to copy, and improve upon, *World War Zero*'s excellent mechanical accomplishments – especially in taming the limp DualShock's analogue sticks – but we've been here far too many times before to reward such prosaic design with anything higher.

Edge rating: Six out of ten











The weapons sound terrific and recoil with jarring clunks. It's a pity, however, that the balance is misjudged. Once you pick up the automatic weapons and rocket launcher you will use nothing else

To say *World War Zero* is generous at handing out medipacks and ammo would be an understatement. There are save points approximately every three minutes, too



110 per cent, soldier

Enter the multiplayer arenas and you're given the usual Deathmatch, Team Deathmatch and Capture The Flag games. The maps are small and uninteresting, but search the options and you'll discover the ability to set the game's speed from 100 to 200 per cent. Not just a gimmick, the Benny Hill slapstick that ensues from the game engine storming along at double speed lifts the mundane to the hilarious, for a while.

TOCA Race Driver 2

Format: **Xbox (version tested) PC** Publisher: **Codemasters** Developer: **In-house** Price: **£40** Release: **April 23**









The impact system has been completely revised, and terminal damage resulting in a retirement is now pleasingly realistic (although AI drivers appear immune to this)



Live for racing

While the game offers a competent twoplayer splitscreen mode, the experience can't hope to compare to the thrill of a 12-player Live (or SystemLink) session. All of the game's 35 vehicles and 52 circuits are available (provided you've unlocked them, of course) and while, as ever, the quality of the event is dependent on the company you keep, the potential for memorable and satisfying encounters is obvious.



With a choice of Formula Ford, GT sportscars, rallycross, ice racing, touring cars, supercars, stock cars, classic cars, hotrods, truck racing and more, *Race Driver 2* caters for all your motorsport needs

Like its prequel, *Race Driver 2* again bravely attempts the uncomfortable marriage between narrative and racing. And second time around the quality has improved, both in terms of script and visuals, while the effect is certainly significantly enhanced by the move to firstperson during the cutscenes.

Ultimately, the action off the track isn't as crucial as that on it, and here too there is noticeable progress. Whereas the *TOCA* series has traditionally struggled to convincingly recreate the handling of non-touring car vehicles, this latest instalment distinguishes itself by offering 15 broadly different forms of motorsport, the majority of which feel as close to the real-life equivalent as you would expect a videogame interpretation to get.

It's this variety of racing categories that is responsible for the game's underlying appeal. True, you may have experienced many of these in other games, but never together in such a competent package. The thrill of not always knowing the next type of racing you'll be offered as you make your way through the game from lowly unknown to earning a seat in the Masters Grand Prix (*Race Driver 2*'s equivalent of F1) is genuine. Progression remains necessarily linear, but often you're given the choice of two paths and the game is balanced well enough to share some of its more exotic series early on rather than following the traditional route of keeping the most interesting stuff for later.

The last component to have been upgraded is the AI. Codemasters' marketing would have you believe that you'll find it difficult to differentiate between real and CPU drivers, and for once the claim isn't entirely far-fetched. While the jury on the usual proclamation regarding 'driver memory' (a rival bumped off the track in one race will return the favour later) is still out, much of how they handle themselves on the track looks instinctive, hence realistic. They make mistakes, lunge desperately late up the inside, no longer brake unnecessarily as they did in *Race Driver* (although hairpins and chicanes still catch them out) and, most remarkably, defend their line when challenged. This is one of the finest racing titles yet.

Much of the attraction is largely due to the variety or racing on offer, but it's the overall quality of that racing that is responsible for ensuring *Race Driver 2* remains an intensely engaging ride.

Edge rating: Eight out of te

Phantasy Star Online III: C.A.R.D Revolution

Format: **GameCube** Publisher: **Sega** Developer: **Sonic Team** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now (US) June 2004 (UK)**

Though perhaps taken as read with the card game subtitle, dynamic appeal is not this new chapter's strong point. *PSO3*'s online structure briefly shares a lobby with the GameCube *PSO1* and *2* contingent before players are sectioned off into card-shuffling or dungeon crawling: it can't help but recall the chess club forlornly watching their classmates head for the playing fields.

PSO faithful may even be insulted by the apparent lack of care given to maintaining the original's synergy of form, function and poise. Aged environments and models are wheeled out and the interface is surprisingly clunky and obtrusive. There is a solid game here to prop it up, but it's indicative of the no-frills production that even the robotic announcer seems to be phoning in its performance.

Your character is chosen from familiar *PSO* classes, and can be played with a Heroside or Darkside deck of your construction. Heroside provides the most familiar experience: cards signifying *PSO*'s arsenal are used to overcome opponents in a stop-motion interpretation of the original. Darkside decks utilise monster-summoning instead of equipment, requiring squad tactics to overcome the combat superiority of the Heroside gear. Either way, battle consists of strategic positioning and judicious use of card effects – and despite aesthetic reservations, it's absorbing stuff, if grudgingly so.

Frustratingly, dice rolls govern player actions, offsetting tactics with a reliance on luck – a low roll can paralyse a player, if not trigger a lengthy defeat. Player-definable rules allow the dice to be boosted or maximised in most multiplayer games, though.

Playing a battle through to conclusion (win or lose) rewards you with new cards, although diminishing returns apply as you amass your collection. Rather than rely on the random mercies of the game, you'll need to trade online to catch 'em all – a subset of powerful cards are also only available by overcoming high-level players.

And the online game is, naturally, the life of *PSO3*. On a positive note, chances are the people you'll encounter online are going to be serious about their card game combat, but there are few other incentives to play. Where *PSO*'s communication options were perfectly adequate for hack and slash, card gaming's lengthy setups and complicated payoffs are more demanding, and not so satisfactorily addressed.

Edge rating: **Six** out of **ten**







PSO's core aesthetic remains strong despite an uninspiring reinterpretation of Ragol, but with a few notable exceptions the potential for a GameCube makeover is left unfulfilled



The screen becomes bewilderingly dense even in a one-on-one match (above), but fourplayer team games plaster it with so much information that the epilepsy warning becomes scarily apt



Pick a card...

PSO3 expects you to spend as much time poring over your cards as you do playing with them, if not more. Creating a finely honed deck to the game's tight 30-card limit is the backbone of the play experience, and exploiting the relationships between card abilities can decide whether you will scrape through a match or score a decisive victory. The editing interface is one of the game's cleaner aspects, making anything from quick substitutions to complete overhauls relatively painless.

Katamari Damacy

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Namco** Developer: **In-house** Price: **¥4,500 (£23)** Release: **Out now (Japan) TBC (UK)** Previously in **E128**









Apparently graphically simple, *Katamari* plays some clever visual tricks – there's a hazy depth-of-field effect, and objects brighten from pastel to primary when they attatch



Balls to the wall

Objects are not just picked up according to size, but also weight. Iron statues remain unattached even when you dwarf them, but even a moderate ball can pick up huge slices of fencing. The bigger you get, the bigger the things that stick, changing the tone from one of initial tranquillity to a delicious rampage. Policemen shoot at you, while fat joggers are assimilated with squeals of horror or, just possibly, delight.



Part of *Katamari*'s irresistible atmosphere is the soundtrack – not just the infectious songs, but the spot sound effects for each object, which rise to a caterwauling cacophony as your ball grows

First it's a butterfly you're after. Then a pencil. Then it's a shoe and a kebab and an umbrella; then a penguin, a tricycle, a pachinko machine. A synchronised swimmer, a lawnmower, a traffic light. You think that these will be enough, that they will satisfy your sticky urge. But they don't. There are tractors and phone booths, baseball teams and elephants. Windmills, oil rigs, brontosauruses. It's never, ever enough.

In *Katamari*, you are the tiny alien pilot of a super-sticky ball. Whatever it touches – if it's small enough – becomes attached, enlarging your ball and snaring progressively bigger items as you go. And it really is everything you touch. You'll lift the chalk drawings off pavements, the signs off shops and riders out of sidecars. Reach the required size within the time limit and the King of Space will convert your huge ball of junk into a star as a reward.

The control scheme uses both analogue sticks, rather in the manner of tank tracks. It takes a little getting used to, but the sense of balance and inertia the system provides makes the game as wonderfully tactile as its premise suggests.

There's a wealth of subtlety within this one-joke format. Big isn't necessarily better. The levels form vast mazes, with areas phasing from inaccessible to accessible to inaccessible again as your ball becomes first big enough and then too big to fit through doors and passageways. It must have required rather more meticulous planning than the airy freedom of the levels suggest. *Katamari*'s remarkable engine doesn't ignore the lumpy physics of your ball, although it does smooth them out considerably. That means sticking on a couple of early lamp posts turns you into something more like a stilt walker, lurching forward in uneven tumbles. It makes ball control harder, but can give you a leg-up to higher areas.

There's a fair bit of variety shuffled into the basic game – including levels where you have to collect a particular class of object instead of simply reaching a target size – and the entertaining diversion of a twoplayer deathmatch. The camera is the only let down, although a bird's-eye view and quick-flip manoeuvre will get you out of most blind spots. When so many games are trying to defend their value by cramming every style and mode into one unpalatable mix, it's refreshing to play something conceived with such vibrant, capricious clarity.

Edge rating: Eight out of ten

Astro Boy

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Sega** Developer: **In-house (Sonic Team)** Price: **¥6,800 (£35)** Release: **Out now (Japan) TBC (UK)** Previously in **E**133

This is one of the early fruits of Sega's new strategy to combine its distinctive style with moneymaking licences. And it's not a disaster, but neither is it atomic.

It's no secret that *Astro Boy* suffered pains during its conception, with Tetsuya Mizuguchi's Sega division merging into Sonic Team shortly before he left. The result is a game that captures its host material effectively but shows little of the UGA spirit.

Astro Boy's world may look like a fantastic candy-coated re-imagining of Metropolis, but those distant horizons and infinite dusky skies are just that: pure fantasy. Fly in any direction for more than a few seconds and you hit a nasty flashing green wall. It looks ugly, it's impossible to detect, and it's a poor way to frame the universe.

There's a bigger problem: *Astro Boy* is for children. You will rarely lose a life in this game unless you are particularly clumsy, or have just picked up a joypad for the first time. We're not against games for children, of course, but *Astro Boy* also has spools of Japanese text, which could dissuade you from buying it on import. Trying to find, and then speak to, the right character to trigger the next game event will often be what gobbles up the minutes rather than the interesting combat and boss battles.

Bizarrely, *Astro Boy* is the first Japanese title to use the Havok physics engine, but it has been used tentatively rather than with the abandon seen elsewhere. Swooping down to street level then crashing through a pile of boxes is fun, but there's never much use for such incidental objects. Much better are the moments when big robots attack, as it's possible to batter them with uprooted lampposts or fling the metal carcasses of destroyed enemies back at their associates.

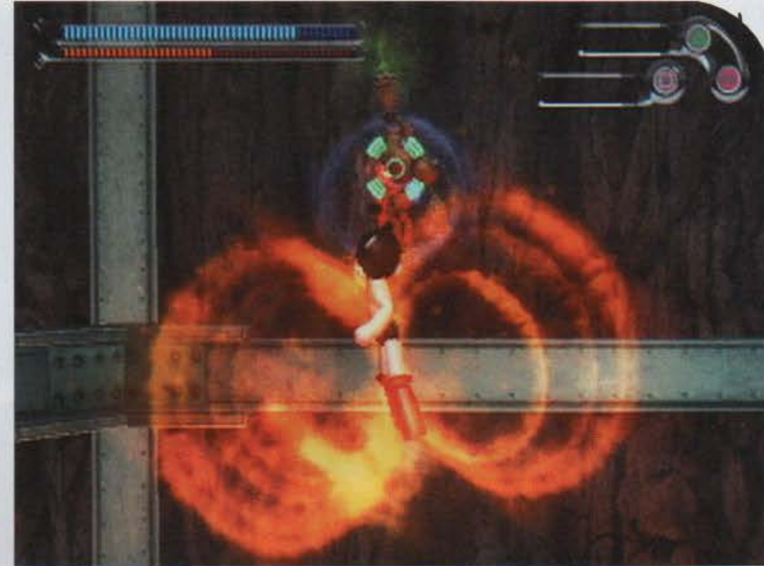
The lovingly crafted characterisation and gradual accumulation of powers infuse *Astro Boy* with some momentum and joy. Each of his special abilities, from the finger laser to the arm rocket, work effectively against particular enemies. It's always a pleasure to throw huge boulders at giant robots, and it's hard not to be swept along with the story when your nemesis looks like a cross between the child catcher from Chitty Chitty Bang Bang and Liberace.

Astro Boy is a light cartoon romp sure to please young admirers of the character, but it fails to offer the depth required to engage a broader demographic.

Edge rating: Five out of ten



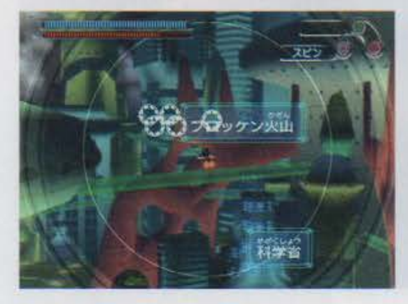








There's a lot of chatting to be done, but most of it appears to be incidental to the plot. Throwing a ball around quickly gets boring





The R1 button activates Astro Boy's second sight ability, allowing him to detect distant enemies and concealed doors (left). The finger-laser is satisfying and works best against nimble foes (right)



Playing Havok

Some game moments are lifted directly from *Super Mario Sunshine*, like the tugging of a boss's tentacles, and *Astro Boy* has so few ideas of its own. The physics system only operates within limited boundaries, too, and throwing a robot through the air can sometimes be dramatic (when it hits a building) and sometimes frustrating (when it lands unharmed behind an invisible wall). More should have been made of the hero's superhuman strength.

LifeLine

Format: **PS2** Publisher: **Konami** Developer: **SCEI** Price: **$40** Release: **Out now (US) TBC (UK)**









While the tone and many camera angles are reminiscent of survival horror titles, the pacing – slowed by voice control – is not. Combat is a weary and staccato experience



She sells seashells

One clever element is a tongue twister mini-game. If you can repeat three of Rio's syllable-packed phrases, she is rewarded with a small boost of energy. When the voice recognition works properly, this is a useful element to fall back on – especially if she's already needlessly eaten all her energy rations mid-battle after one of her frequent misunderstandings.



***Lifeline* sees you traverse a variety of locations with details that befit the space-station-turned-hotel setting. It's a shame that so much of these locations are either underused or indistinguishable**

On paper, *LifeLine* sounds thrilling. Mixing the classic adventure genre with survival horror, you control protagonist Rio via the PS2's USB headset. You must guide her – your character is all-seeing, monitoring Rio from a security room – through a space station hotel under attack from aliens, relying on your voice instead of a DualShock.

Off the page, *LifeLine* fails to impress. The self-touted 'deep' vocabulary is one element of its undoing. Claiming oral registers for thousands of phrases, *LifeLine* isn't lying – but the range of words used is a hindrance. The game demands you guess what objects are before Rio examines them, so you can waste time trying to find the correct term, hampering progress. As a result, the game's keyword system (where you find words scribbled on scraps of paper, giving Rio special combat and action moves) fails to become relevant as you push on.

The setup is overcomplicated, compounded by a shallow technological framework which isn't enough to prop up the (admirably ambitious) concept. Environments are bland and without major detail, so when describing things you'll struggle even more as objects lack definition. Imagine our surprise when what looked like a tray of rubber balls turned out to be a plate of doughnuts.

While you're straining to find the words that will get Rio investigating you'll find yourself speaking slowly and precisely, as the voice engine is very patchy. This is poor form when random battles require quick orders, and running into situations where Rio answers the command 'Examine the table' with 'I'll go outside' is just plain farcical.

The narrative is contrived, with no opportunity to feel involved – your role is passively issuing commands only to forward the plot. The cameras are limited to a fixed zoom, are in weird and unlikely locations and you never directly control their movement. Even with some smart elements (see 'She sells seashells') the game feels like interactivity at its lowest level. It's a shame, but *LifeLine* is just poorly implemented. With the laborious pacing complicated by the dodgy voice recognition, flaws in the gimmicky core technology negate what satisfying moments are on offer here.

Localisation demands within Europe suggest that *LifeLine* won't appear in the UK any time soon. And, dare we say it, that's not such a bad thing.

Edge rating: Four out of ten

Dead Man's Hand

Format: **Xbox** Publisher: **Atari** Developer: **Human Head Studios** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now** Previously in **E**121, **E**134

Revenge is a dish best served cold, or so the old saying goes. Here's another: games are best when they don't slow down when Absolutely Anything Significant Happens. Perhaps not the pithiest aphorism, but one Human Head Studios would've been wise to heed. Technically, you see, *Dead Man's Hand* is a mess – which is a shame because this could have been a whole barrel of fun.

Left for dead by his former gang, El Tejon must hunt down and kill those who betrayed him. The simple plot admirably frames the action even if the voice-acting lists between 'A Fistful of Dollars' and 'Carry On Cowboy'. You travel through the usual Wild West settings shooting at anything that moves or has a high-explosive symbol on the side. It's not dissimilar to a fairground shooting gallery, complicated by chain reactions and combos.

It's here *Dead Man's Hand* starts to irritate. Considering these environments are roughly hewn, it's staggering to find that changing weapons or shooting a wagon's wheel can cause the framerate to drop significantly. Definitely a case of 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly'. Mostly ugly.

Edge rating: Three out of ten





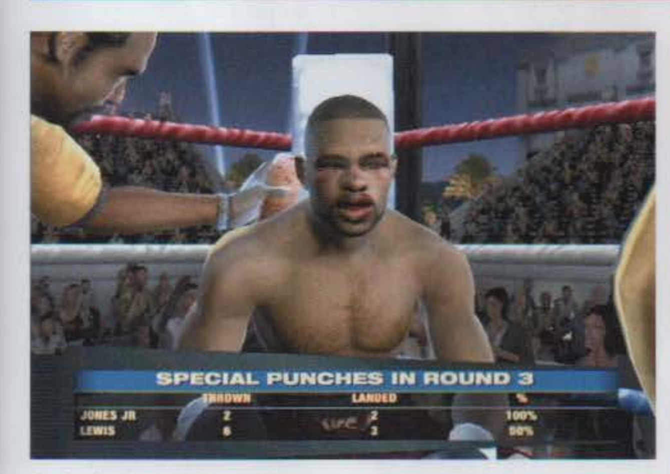




Before each adventure it's possible to win extra ammo on the turn of a card (left). Although it's a simple five card stud poker game, the CPU ensures that the odds are stacked in your favour. Getting a flush or four of a kind is easy, but it only takes one losing hand to throw away everything you've accumulated. Shooting portly outlaws (above) can be gratifying, but framerate issues spoil some novel design

Fight Night 2004

Format: **PS2 (version tested) Xbox, GC** Publisher: **EA** Developer: **EA Sports** Price: **£40** Release: **April 30** Previously in **E**135



Despite the glossy remoteness that sometimes deadens the blows during play, *Fight Night*'s depiction of the aftermath is unflinching. Heavy bouts render fighters almost unrecognisable behind a blossom of livid purple bruises







As is synonymous with the EA brand, *Fight Night* is so slickly produced you can practically smell the polish. But what you're *not* smelling is sweat on leather and the coppery scent of blood after each thunderous impact: this is production nearly to the point of distraction. It's possible your boxer will be crashing to the canvas before you realise he's taken a serious beating, so thoroughly have the raw edges been smoothed over.

That said, this is a videogame about boxing, not a boxing simulator. The vaunted twin-stick control (left to move, right to punch, with shoulder buttons modifying to weave and block respectively) succeeds in being accessible, quickly gratifying and rewarding of studied play. Career Mode is addictively epic, and its stat-building mini-games commendably teach skills and timing without resorting to white-knuckled handholding.

As a reinvention it's a resounding success, and there are no pretenders to its comprehensiveness, but like a hero taking punches in a Hollywood movie – material EA's games consciously reference – it doesn't always look like it hurts.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten

Glass Rose

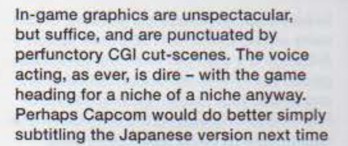
Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Capcom** Developer: **In-house** Price: **£20** Release: **Out now**







In-game graphics are unspectacular, but suffice, and are punctuated by perfunctory CGI cut-scenes. The voice acting, as ever, is dire – with the game heading for a niche of a niche anyway. Perhaps Capcom would do better simply subtitling the Japanese version next time





If Revolution's *Broken Sword* regards itself as the future of the graphic adventure, then *Glass Rose* is a glimpse of the past. Static screens portray a series of rooms through which the player can wander, and the joypad controls a pointer. Hit a point of interest, and a short piece of story exposition plays. The plot isn't as clichéd as the dynamic, but the voice acting is dreadful. Perhaps that's because the dialogue is so rough.

The difference between the Easy and Normal modes is that Easy highlights the interactive objects as you pass. That's because Easy highlights itself as a means for players to enjoy the story without worrying about anything as offputting as a game. And when a game's fundamental mechanic is stripped away like that, you have to question if it qualifies as such a thing. That's not to say *Glass Rose* is bereft of neat touches – conversations are handled well, with the player highlighting words and adding question marks. Ultimately, it's all about fumbling through, trying to find the hot spots and stumbling along a clumsy narrative until you reach a disappointing conclusion.

Edge rating: Three out of ten

Savage: The Battle For Newerth

Format: **PC** Publisher: **Digital Jesters** Developer: **S2 Games** Price: **£30** Release: **Out now**

More intelligent than your average online shooter, the idea is simple: combine the resource management and strategy of the *Age Of...* series, yet replace the troops with actual players. A commander has a top-down view, researching, constructing and distributing hardware, while the grunts run around in firstperson, hitting each other and the opposing team. With boomsticks.

Progress is tied to technological advancement. Each side begins as basic melee troopers but as gems are mined, bad guys are massacred and defences are built, each side develops. Soon you progress to bows and arrows, and then you're fizzing lasers through the gorgeous swamps and forests while great behemoths bear down on your position. Each character class offers a different experience: shelling an enemy barracks from afar with a catapult still feels remarkably novel.

Such an outré offering requires a different mindset. Tactical play is an advantage, but teamwork is mandatory. Reliance on grunts taking orders from a commander can be a problem, but this quirky concept deserves recognition.

Edge rating: Six out of ten







The command interface matches that of *Warcraft* and *Age Of Mythology*: the only difference is the smaller range of units and buildings available. That, and the inability of your troops to obey you

Fallout: Brotherhood Of Steel

Format: **PS2 (version tested) Xbox** Publisher: **Interplay** Developer: **Black Isle Studios** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now**

Given the title, *Fallout* veterans might hope to begin the game ready to dispense frontier justice as a Brotherhood paladin. Unfortunately, action-RPG convention dictates starting from nothing with a bar fight and a vermin infestation – setting a recurring theme of missed opportunities.

The original RPGs had similarly low-key openings, but *Brotherhood* fails in two respects: there are few suggestions it'll get better, and it doesn't feel like *Fallout*. The crass dialogue and thrash-metal soundtrack are more angry schoolboy than grittily mature. Dialogue trees suggest choice, but your choice is irrelevant, while the (rigid) main story and side-quests are sloppily implemented.

Worse, the action is underwhelming. The addition of bottomless pits and jumping puzzles feels cheap; gunfights are unengaging, suffer from feast-or-famine ammunition rationing, and enemies are likely to kill themselves. There's practically no aspect that doesn't appear half-hearted. Black Isle's drawn-out death has undoubtedly poisoned *Brotherhood*, but it's hard to tell if there was ever a good game here to begin with.

Edge rating: Three out of ten









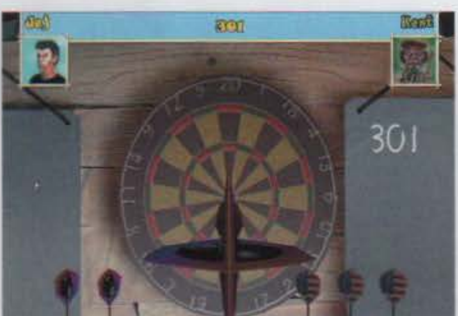
Murky visuals and imprecise controls ensure hours of death-drop hilarity. Some karmic redress is provided by the AI being even more prone to stumbling off the edge of the world than you will be

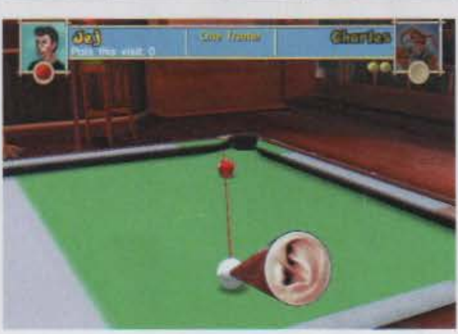
Pool Paradise

Format: **PS2 (version tested) Xbox, GC, PC** Publisher: **Ignition** Developer: **Awesome Studios** Price: **£20** Release: **Out now (PS2, GC, PC) Summer (Xbox)**

Previously in E134









There are two drawbacks. First is the inability to skip your opponent's turn when playing against the computer. Second, every sub-game and notable extra needs to be unlocked. If ever there was a game that didn't need to artificially inflate the sense of longevity, this is it

It's not the most glamorous form of escapism to be captured in videogame form, but we'll assume you've already made your mind up about whether or not virtual pool makes for worthwhile entertainment. If you have, then *Pool Paradise* represents an extremely elaborate package deal.

Tropical beach resort theme aside, there's lots of frippery outside of actual pool and the myriad accompanying options: 'crazy' tables that look more at home in a *Tetris* well than a pool hall, 'crazy' baizes and cues and a host of non-'crazy' sub-games. There's the forgettable Skeepool and Coconut Shy, but the Darts mini-game is excellent, utilising the controller to tremendous effect.

Which is where the strength of the game lies: the analogue cue stroke brings as much to the table as *Tiger Woods*' thumbstick swing did to the golf game. For console owners used to having to fiddle with power sliders in order to orchestrate their shots, it brings a nigh-on edible element of tangibility to the experience. For PC pool fans, it represents less of a leap, but *Pool Paradise* still remains an accomplished bundle.

Edge rating: Eight out of ten

Psyvariar 2: The Will To Fabricate

Format: **Dreamcast (version tested) PS2** Publisher: **Skonec** Developer: **Success** Price: **¥5,800 (£30) ¥6,800 (£35) with dog tag** Release: **Out now (Japan) TBC (UK)**



Boss fights provide an abundance of Buzz-friendly bullet patterns, if a solid wall of neon death could ever be described as friendly







Forget the disappointing original – this is superior in every respect. The completely three-dimensional visuals teeter on *Ikaruga* territory and, while each of the six levels remains woefully short, the experience is deeper and more satisfying.

The Buzz system returns, ever the lynchpin to the game's addictiveness: grazing enemy flak levels up the player's ship and provides temporary invulnerability, but a direct hit still means death. Each of the two characters has a bias toward either levelling-up speed or invincibility duration, with the spin function now just a case of double-tapping in any direction. The level gauge can be sped up or slowed down by destroying coloured enemies – red, for instance, reduces the fill to a crawl. Keeping a watch over the stats fast becomes a necessity.

An engaging and attractive blaster, then, blessed with an intricate shooting system. However, like *Border Down* or *Zero Gunner 2*, the arcade heritage affects *Psyvariar 2*, and while a more lasting design would have been preferable to the condensed lifespan, the adrenaline fix is more than enough compensation.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten

Gungrave OD

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Sega/Red Entertainment** Developer: **Ikusabune/Red Entertainment** Price: **¥6,800 (£35)** Release: **Out now (Japan) TBC (US/UK)** Previously in **E**129

Playing *Gungrave OD*, there's a nagging sensation that the design team experienced the original through a shop window. The sleek aesthetics are present (though inexplicably the striking black outlines and stark palette are not), as are ever-larger gangs of thugs and bits of scenery to destroy. From a distance, it's comfortably familiar.

What's missing is *Gungrave*'s gravity: Grave's deliberate executioner's tread, the tangible weight behind gunshots and coffin-swipe, the murderous rhythm of its level design. Without this core detail, *OD*'s additional content – and there's an impressive wealth of the stuff – is firing blanks. It's a shame, as the new characters have homicidal chic to spare, and a clever health-for-kills system encourages bursts of considered violence. The inevitable slow-motion effect impresses too, as levels disintegrate in strobing clouds of red mist and shrapnel.

OD's (over) extended playing time will outstay its welcome long before all the extras are sampled. In attempting to meet criticisms of *Gungrave*'s singleminded focus, that focus has been squandered. The result is unlikely to satisfy.

Edge rating: Four out of ten

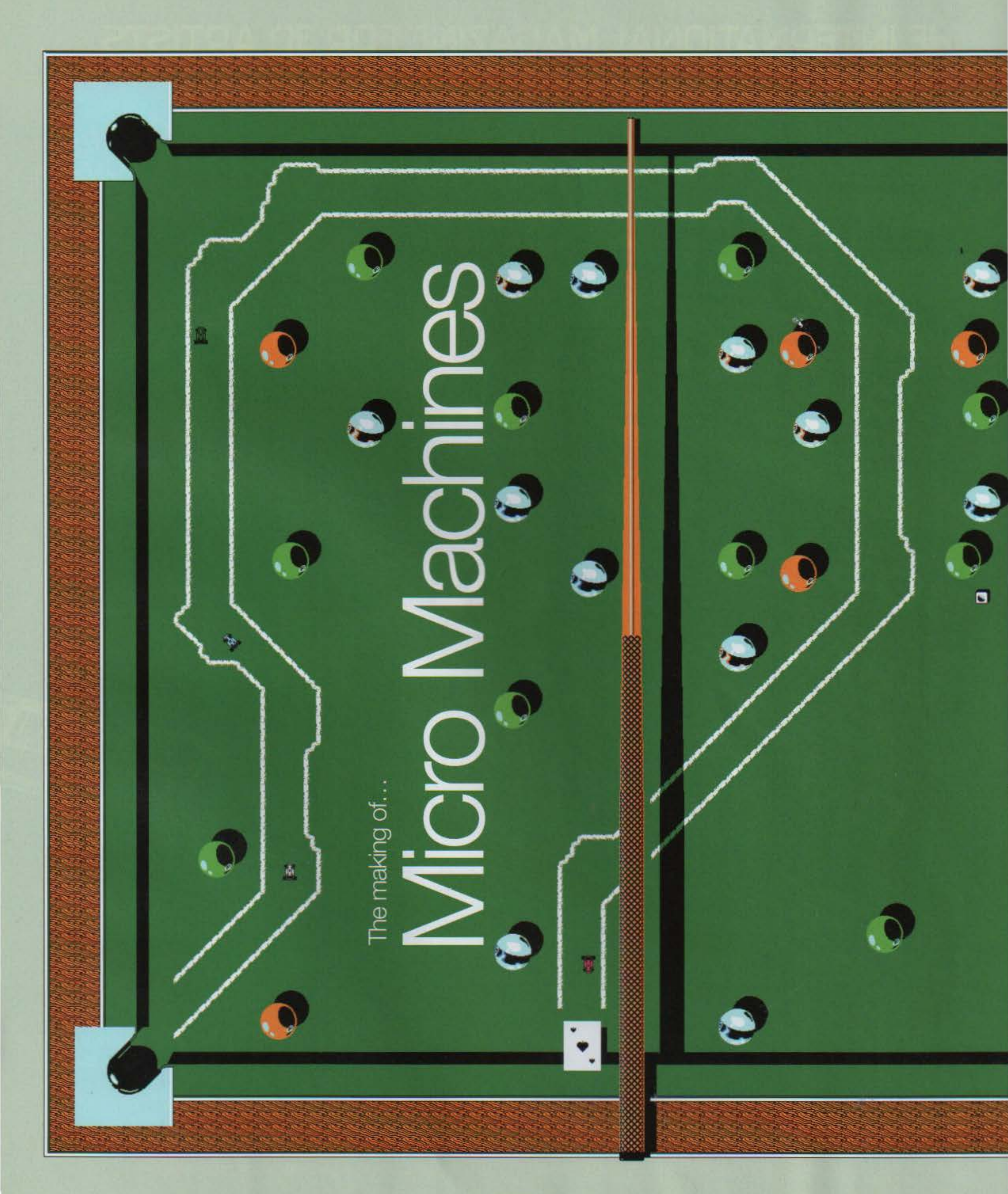








With the new-look Grave somewhat lacking, pride of place goes to guitar-wielding Rocketbilly Redcadillac and his power chords of arcing electric death. Elvis has levelled the building


The making of...
Micro Machines



Or: how a small Warwickshire company made one of the most fiercely compelling multiplayer racing games of all time, then faced up to the mighty Nintendo – and won

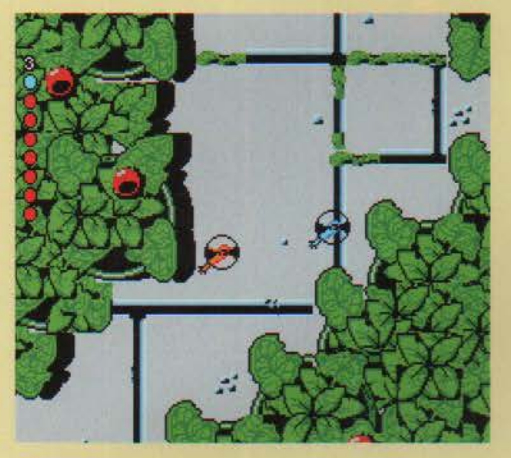
Formed by the Darling family – father Jim and siblings David and Richard – in the latter half of 1986, Codemasters originally acquired a modest reputation as a purveyor of cheap, cheerful and oft-forgettable 'budget' software for home computers. During 1989, however, the company began to undergo a quiet metamorphosis. Like the Stamper brothers at Rare, the Darlings wished to turn their attention to the fantastically successful NES market. A gifted employee called Ted Carron began work on two devices that would change the company's fortunes: the 'Power Pak', a peripheral that would allow players to enter cheat codes for NES games and, apropos of Codemasters' intention to avoid Nintendo's hideously expensive licensing program, a prototype NES development kit.

Original format: **NES**
Publisher: **Camerica/Codemasters (US) Codemasters (UK)**
Developer: **In-house**
Origin: **US**
Original release date: **1991 (US), 1992 (UK)**

"At the time it wasn't easy to get a licence and we didn't need one, so we went ahead without it," explains creative director **Richard Darling**. "We produced our own development systems and began development of our own games. The hardest part was finding a way to get around the protection system on the NES, so that our games would not be treated as 'counterfeit' by the NES."

In April 1989, coder **Andrew Graham** – then working on a computer science degree at the University of Strathclyde – was commissioned to port an old Oliver twins game to the NES. "I had been doing some conversions for them on the C64, Amiga and ST in my spare time at university, and they asked me if I wanted to do an NES game," he recalls. "I converted *Treasure Island Dizzy* using Codies' home-made development system. Ted Carron had made a rather Heath Robinson development system which consisted of a PC connected to a Commodore 64 connected to a box full of wires and electronics, all hooked up to a consumer NES. They





The speedboat race (top) was a one-lap contest that opened every singleplayer bout of *Micro Machines*. It was almost impossible not to win, unlike the forever awkward helicopter race pictured above

mailed the whole lot up to me in Scotland. It was a miracle it all worked when I put it together. His subsequent NES dev kits were altogether more compact. They were given code names from characters in 'Blade Runner'. I think one of them was called Leon, or something."

Looking back, Graham suggests that his port of *Treasure Island Dizzy* might have been – by design or through a later change of heart – something of a dry run for Codemasters' NES ambitions. Indeed, it only received a release years later, as one of four games on a package called *Quattro Adventure*. However, Graham's efforts as a freelance led to an offer that would prove extraordinarily fruitful for the Darlings: they asked him to take a year out to write an NES title.

The young programmer began work on his first original game – *California Buggy Boys*, an NES racing game with a top-down perspective – during October 1989. "A lot of the graphics were done – you were racing along a beach and across the dunes," Graham recalls. "The cars were the same kind of buggies that appeared in *Power Drift* – I loved that game. I just liked the whole kind of sunshiney happy-happy fun theme to it. They were specifically looking for something that would go down well in America, hence *California Buggy Boys*, I guess. We had a number of games in development. Gavin Raeburn, now a very successful studio head at Codies, did an arcadey racing shoot 'em up called *Ultimate Stuntman*, and the Oliver twins put a lot of work into what was probably the biggest and best of their Dizzy games, *The Fantastic Adventures Of Dizzy*. There were others as well."

Inadvertently, it was Ted Carron's Power Pak that led to the demise of *California Buggy Boys*. Renamed the Game Genie by David Darling – as players could insert three codes, or 'wishes', at a time – Carron's project led to an opportunity for Codemasters, and, in turn, a change of direction for Graham's racing game. "We had started working with Galoob Toys in San Francisco when they licensed the Game Genie from us," explains Darling. "Their biggest line of toys was the Micro Machines range, and so it was an obvious match. We really liked the idea of adapting the game to be based on the toys, as this gave the game a really unique feel – being based on miniature cars racing in everyday real-world locations."

"It made sense to exploit this well-known brand, rather than launching the totally unknown *California Buggy Boys*," concedes Graham. "I remember it took a while to get used to the idea that my game was now about these plasticky little toys, rather than full-sized buggies on beaches, though."

The outside world

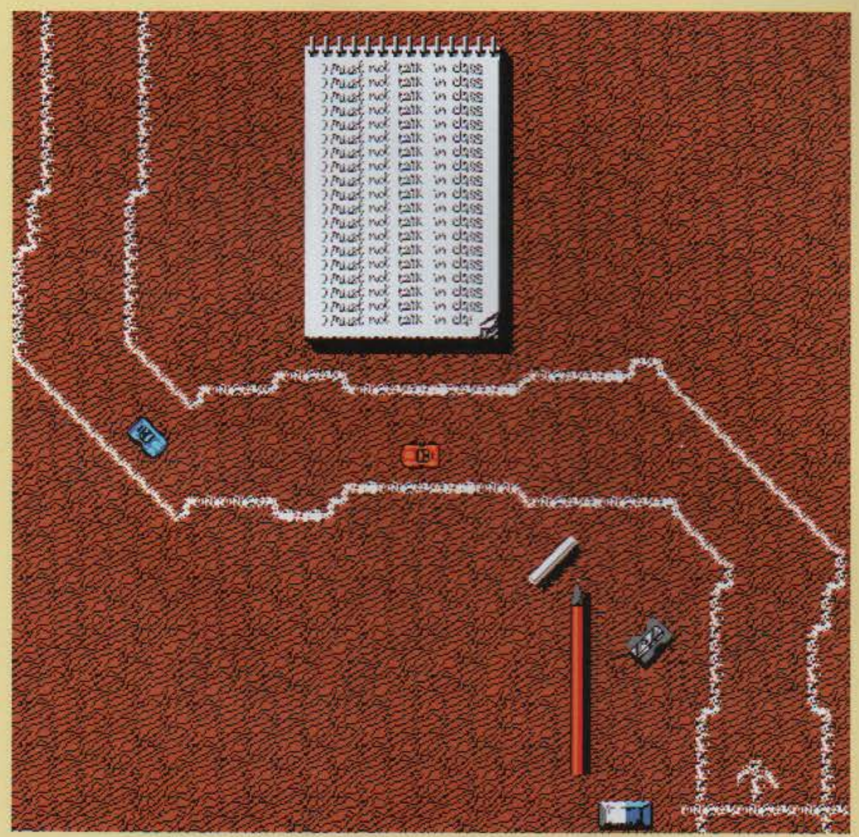
Working from a prefabricated hut in a field outside the main building – "Codemasters had made up for lack of office space by building a little village of cabins in a field behind their house," remembers Graham. "We had to tiptoe across wooden boards with our cups of coffee when it was raining and the field was muddy" – *Micro Machines* began to take shape early in 1990: the year in which Nintendo would famously seek an injunction to prevent Galoob's sale of the Game Genie. **Paul Perrot** was assigned as lead artist with a little assistance from **Toby Egglesfield**, with John Menzies writing the front end.

"Codies was a cool place to work," enthuses erstwhile Codemasters staffer Egglesfield, now living and working in New Zealand. "You knew everyone there pretty soon. Most of the guys were pretty young and some had sports cars, while lots of the ones who didn't had posters of them. One of the really nice things was how hands-on everything was."

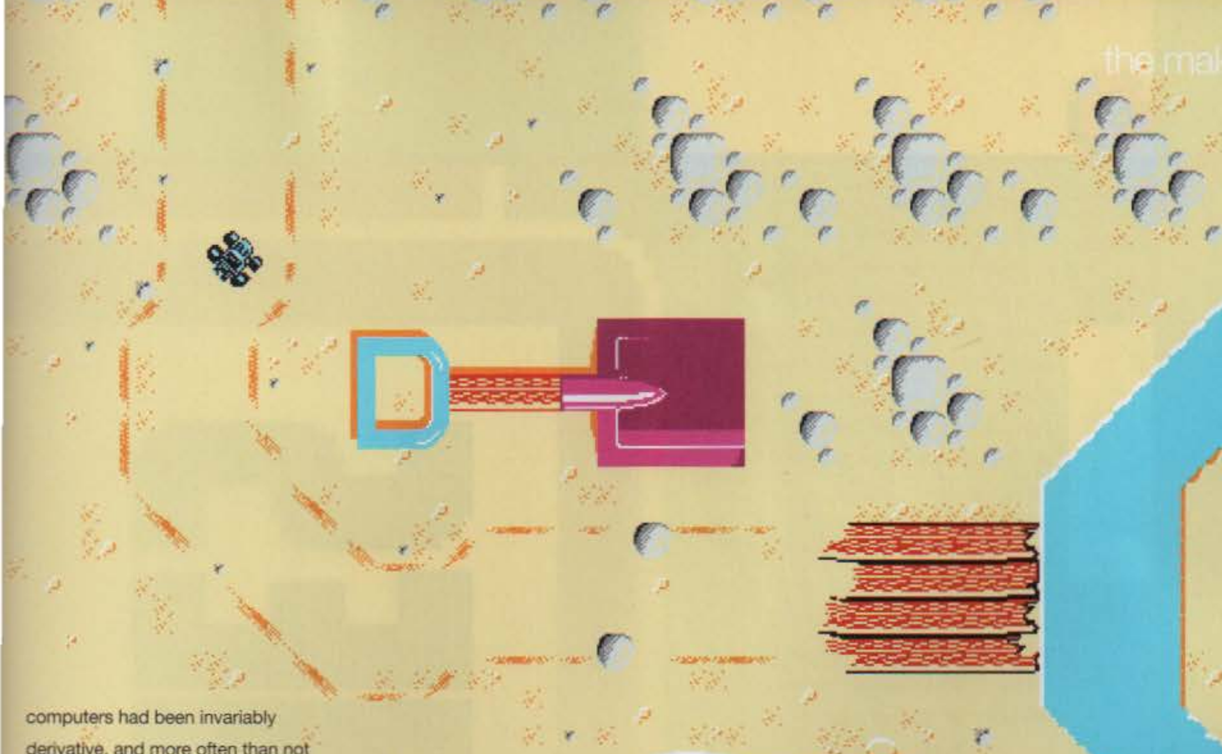
"Codies was a cool place to work. Most of the guys were pretty young and some had sports cars, while lots of the ones who didn't had posters of them"

"The atmosphere was great," agrees Perrot, who now plies his trade in post-production for TV and films. "We felt we were taking on the big companies and stuffing one up them at their own game. There was a general friendliness and sense of fun, and most of the senior guys weren't averse to a party or three."

Lending weight to the argument that a happy workforce is a productive workforce, the development of *Micro Machines* saw Codemasters step up a gear. Whereas its releases for home



This small screenshot map demonstrates *Micro Machines*' multiplayer mode at its finest. The positioning of screen furniture makes taking shortcuts difficult, but not impossible: games were won and lost on simple bends like these



computers had been invariably derivative, and more often than not of questionable quality, *Micro Machines* would become the company's most innovative and polished game by far. One stroke of genius stands out in particular: the decision that the racing would take place on magnified representations of real-life environs, from breakfast tables to baths, lending it a highly individual look.

Where did this idea come from? "There was some input from the boys above but mainly I think it was Andrew (Graham) and I throwing ideas around," answers Perrot. "Some, like the school desk, were so obvious that I don't think anyone could lay claim to it – maybe it was Andrew. I remember the pool table was an option while we were playing pool at the pub at lunchtime."

Fine as the concept was in principle, the relative shortcomings of Nintendo's hardware necessitated certain compromises. "The NES had limited character-based graphics with which we needed to create recognisable household environments, so there tended to be a fair bit of repetition," explains Graham. "I guess that's part of the whole *Micro Machines* 'look', where you have a table with 15 cereal bowls, and five boxes of cereal on it. You just accept it, like you accept the fact that Tom and Jerry have just run past that table for the 50th time."

With *California Buggy Boys*' art assets discarded, Perrot had to start from scratch, working with the unfamiliar NES hardware. "There were four palettes of three colours and a background colour and transparency layer," he says. "It was all done in DPaint 2 or 3, I think. I'd send through the graphics on a floppy and Andrew would shove them in the game. Then, with a stern look, he'd let me know which ones hadn't worked and I had to check each pixel to fix them. There was a 256 character limit for backgrounds, and drawing nine rotations of sprites for each vehicle was pretty damned boring and annoying."

With the tracks taking shape, the next step was to introduce code-controlled competitors. Graham opted for a simple solution, one that veterans of races with *Micro Machines*' highly methodical AI might find amusing. "Basically, the whole world was covered with invisible arrows pointing in the direction the car should drive," he reveals. "The car would just rotate to face the direction of the arrow that it was sitting on top of. Editing all those arrows down was just a matter of hard work for me or for Paul."

Although this technique effectively made races 'time trials' in all but name, it was a technique that worked and, more pertinently, was far from CPU-intensive. "It was a good robust system for the hardware available at the time, given that you could drive as far off the track as you liked," agrees Graham. "No matter how lost the AI cars would get, they just followed the arrows and they would lead them back to the track – there was very little CPU power required. If you found that the cars were repeatedly banging into a cereal box or something, then it just meant that you had the arrows pointing into the box, and you needed to edit them."

It is *Micro Machines*' multiplayer mode, though, that elevated it from being a pleasingly stylised and solid racing game to a classic of its era. Its simple premise – that players attempt to 'scroll' their opponent

When the chips are down

Producing an unlicensed NES game, Codemasters had no access to Nintendo's quality-assurance teams, but *Micro Machines* had to be glitch free: the company's reputation depended on that. Richard Darling tells us about a single bug that slipped through the net...

"We had tested the game and thought we had removed all the bugs so it was ready for manufacture. We had the ROM image sent to the factory in Taiwan and authorised the production of tens of thousands of chips. This is the most expensive part of the cartridge – I think around eight dollars each. When we got the chips back to the UK for assembly into cartridges we discovered a bug: if you reversed on the first level the game would crash! None of our testers had found it, since the first level was so easy none of them ever tried reversing. We couldn't let the game go out with that error in it. We had thousands of chips with a bugged version of the game on, and they were not rewritable. On the face of it these were scrap, but we had two pieces of luck which saved all the chips and the eight weeks it would have cost to have them remade. First, the bug was tracked down to a single bit. Out of the millions of bits of data only one was wrong, it was a zero and should have been a one. Second, we had just developed the Game Genie. The purpose of this device was to change certain elements of cartridge games so the player could select the number of lives, and so forth. We knew how to make a console read a ROM and get modifications to the original data, so we built some additional circuitry right into the *Micro Machines* cartridges which acted like a mini Game Genie, and this modified the bit of data that was wrong on the ROM chips to correct it. We were able to release the game on time, with the error fixed, and without having to scrap tens of thousands of ROM chips!"



from the edge of the screen but, by racing ahead, have their efforts hampered by a reduced view distance – was something of a masterstroke. "Since we had to go inside to the main building to make coffee, Andrew and I used to play the prototype game to see who would have to make the freezing trek," says Perrot. "That's how I knew it was going to be a great game: we would play it all the time for fun."

"The single-screen system was something I was keen to try from early in the development," explains Graham. "Split-screen would never really have been a viable option on the NES, and would be very cramped on an overhead scrolling race game. I was very happy with the multiplayer mode. It was clearly the best part of the game, making the singleplayer mode look a bit boring in comparison. There were always people coming into the building for a game, even when we only had one test track, and that's pretty encouraging. I remember with pride when Richard Darling was enjoying a twoplayer game and said 'This is the best game we've ever made'. I was well chuffed."

Graham actually had another multiplayer mode planned, one that was sadly (though understandably) discarded. "At one point we had a multi-deck version of *Micro Machines* working; you could join multiple decks together and have people playing a game across a network," he reveals. "That was pretty ingenious, given the technical limitations, although from a gameplay point of view it didn't really add much. We demonstrated

that at the CES in Las Vegas."

Micro Machines was completed, after a number of unpleasant all-night sessions – some consecutive, Graham tells us – in September 1990, in time for its designer and coder to return to his degree.

"It was clear to us that it was a fun multiplayer game, but it was a matter of whether we could get people to play it for long enough to realise it for themselves," he says. "There is a bit of a learning curve, especially with those people who couldn't handle the 'driving down the screen' thing."

But first, Codemasters had to actually get the *Micro Machines* cart into American stores...





Thought its singleplayer mode is not its strongest feature, *Micro Machines* was nonetheless an absorbing game. The addition of bonus races for able players was a nice touch although, being a child of its era, *Machines* cruelly returns players to race one once their lives are exhausted. Game designers had a draconian sense of fair play back in the early 1990s

Playing with the big boys

With Nintendo taking an extremely dim view of companies bypassing its licensing system, there was always a chance – however slim, with hindsight, it might have been – that *Micro Machines* could have been caught in a perpetual wheelspin at the start line, its impetus robbed by lengthy and expensive litigation. "We were always aware that there was a risk that Nintendo would make a claim that we had infringed their rights and try to prevent our games from being sold," admits Darling. "This is why we had to make sure that everything we did in the design, development and manufacturing of the games would not infringe any of their rights."

"Its not a secret that Nintendo was actively trying to stop us marketing the Game Genie and the unlicensed games," says Graham. "There was no contact with or support from Nintendo. We had no access to official Nintendo development documents, and what technical information we did have came from reverse engineering the hardware. At the time we were told to be careful of strange people who might be collecting evidence for the evil and mighty Nintendo. We were young and paranoid."

But 1991 was little short of a miracle year for Codemasters. Judge Fern Smith ruled in favour of Galoob in the Game Genie case (leading to a reported 500,000 immediate orders from retail), and the decision was upheld after a Nintendo appeal. It was a momentous decision. "They all loved it. Godzilla in Toyland had gotten beaten," says Nintendo's **Howard Lincoln** in David Sheff's 'Game Over'. Less newsworthy, but significant nonetheless, was the launch of Codemasters' first NES games: *The Fantastic Adventures Of Dizzy* and, yes, *Micro Machines*.

Not only did the company avoid a near disaster during the first production run of *Micro Machines* chips due to a QA oversight (see 'When the chips are down'), it and US distributor/partner Camerica also managed to escape the overt wrath of Nintendo. Codemasters had been very careful in its design of its 256K cartridges so, legally, Nintendo could not prevent their sale. Behind the scenes, however, there were allegations of retailer intimidation, with fellow renegade NES publishers American Video Entertainment and Color Dreams suggesting chains were being dissuaded from stocking 'unofficial' cartridges by aggressively 'persuasive' Nintendo sales reps.

Although a success for Codemasters, *Micro Machines* was not the stellar performer at retail that it perhaps could have been. "There were plenty of good reviews, but in the end I don't think *Micro Machines* on the NES sold in spectacular quantities," laments Graham. "In the US there were too many legal complexities, and we were relying on others to market the game."

In a longer timeframe, though, who would hazard to put a price on the value of the *Micro Machines* franchise to Codemasters? With an estimated five million copies of its various guises sold worldwide before Infogrames (through its association with Galoob owners Hasbro) appropriated the licence for its mediocre PS2 and Xbox releases, it played a integral part in making the Warwickshire-based outfit the company it is today: that rare beast, a successful independent UK software house.



RESET

Examining gaming history from **Edge**'s perspective, five years ago this month



Issue 71, May 1999

"Is this GAME OVER for Nintendo?" asked the cover of **E**71, a smashed-up N64 illustrating the fanbait coverline. "The answer… is an emphatic 'no,' of course," said the editorial intro two pages later, just in time to stop most of the fanboys' crayons hitting their Kirby-themed writing paper.

But things were starting to look bleak for the console, **Edge** pointing towards a weak release roster, the apparent cancellation of the 64DD, and Sony's PS2 posturing as worrying signs for the future.

Thank goodness for 'insiders', who revealed the specs of the firm's next-generation machine: cartridges will be eschewed in favour of DVD-ROM, and the system will be built with internet connectivity at its core.

Technology of an even more speculative sort was dealt with in the issue's central feature: Whatever happened to virtual reality? "It was a bit rubbish, so it went away," was the essence of the conclusion, although we did postulate that it might take off again if a large PC manufacturer had the foresight to bundle HMDs – head mounted display units, or, for the easily eyestrained, headsets of mass destruction.

And on the subject of strained eyes and broken hearts, Sega's *Blue Stinger* rolled in for review and provided the first signs of impending disillusion with the Dreamcast. "Simply unacceptable," we wrote. "Sega now needs *Biohazard: Code Veronica* to impress more than ever."

OMG!!!!!! OMG!!!!!!!1 The Dremcast iz dead! Get the Sonic notepaper out…





DID EDGE REALLY SAY THAT?
"As before, all female fighters are well endowed in the mammary department."
Some day, we intend to visit this mysterious mammary department.

DID THEY REALLY SAY THAT?
"Share options."
Glenn Corpes tells us what he misses most about Bullfrog. He's joking, of course. We think.

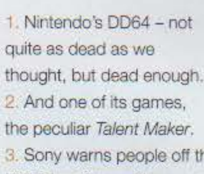
TESTSCREENS AND RATINGS:
Aliens Vs Predator (PC; 8/10), *Blue Stinger* (DC; 5/10), *Aero Dancing* (DC; 4/10), *X-Wing Alliance* (PC; 8/10), *Redline* (PC; 4/10), *Um Jammer Lammy* (PS; 6/10), *Duke Nukem: Zero Hour* (N64; 7/10), *The House Of The Dead* (DC; 7/10)



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10

1. Nintendo's DD64 – not quite as dead as we thought, but dead enough.
2. And one of its games, the peculiar *Talent Maker*.
3. Sony warns people off the '99 Tokyo Game Show.
4. Lost Toys, captured by circus performers. Eek.
5. Virtual insanity: a working demonstration from **Edge**.
6. C64 *Aliens*: An unnerving experience rarely equalled.
7. A model citizen, courtesy of *Shenmue*.
8. The wireless add-on for the NGP allowed 64 simultaneous players.
9. Silver girls from the TGS
10. We get all touchy-feely with VR, a sexy hobby for curious bachelors that could turn you blind.

inbox

Communicate by post:
Letters, **Edge**, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath BA1 2BW
Or email (stating 'Inbox' in the message header):
edge@futurenet.co.uk

I was very interested to read your article in **E**134 on the next generation of console hardware, but was surprised by the omission of any comment regarding the ill-fated Sega Saturn. Given the focus of the article on the logical progression of hardware towards parallel processing, this is surely a very relevant example. At its best the Saturn spawned the likes of *Radiant Silvergun*, which wiped the floor with the best that PlayStation had to offer. However, you can arguably count these titles on one hand. At its worst (and far more commonly) the Saturn was no better than the equally ill-fated Sega 32X, spawning more shoddy games than you can shake a stick at. My point? Consoles that rely on parallel processing yield amazing games from amazing code houses and mediocre games from pretty much everyone else, simply because parallel processing is a complex and difficult art which will be made yet harder for coders in the future as they will have to consider not one, but three separate systems all using varied and complex parallel processing architectures. Surely lessons should have been learned from the Saturn? After all, consoles are only as good as the games made for them, and those games are only as good as the teams behind them; not everyone can be as good as the likes of Treasure.

The thing that makes this apparent lack of consideration to the skills of the workforce more worrying is that the next generation of hardware could potentially make or break the games industry. Let's hypothetically assume a worst-case scenario, whereby all three major players release something akin to the Saturn, which is so hard to program that each have only a handful of good games. Consumers will simply lose faith in the industry's ability to deliver cutting-edge entertainment, and videogames will once again become the pursuit of the closet geek. Yes, I am assuming an absolute worst-case scenario, but the risks of developing ever more complex architectures are still very real.

Even if Sony, Nintendo et al succeed in producing workable parallel processing-based architecture, what will the wider world of gaming really gain from it? Is all this over complication of hardware really worthwhile for the sake of a bit of eye candy? I for one think it's about time the industry took a step back and considered whether 'bigger, better, more' is really a sensible philosophy, and where this spiralling obsession with technological superiority is going to take us.
Henry Wilson

We don't have a problem with 'bigger, better, more' – at least not yet – but building it is certainly a considerable issue. And it's one that Microsoft, at least, seems to be tackling...

I've been a gaming addict all my life, and have been working in the industry as a journalist for four years now. With this letter, I just want to say that I am quite disappointed in a lot of other journalists. Not anyone in particular, though – I just don't like what's going on in the underbelly of our industry. The thing that bothers me most is the typical trend of aping each other. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. Almost every game journalist likes to condemn the hypes that are created for games by their big publishers, but actually, we have our own little hypes going on.

It has come to a point where you are almost afraid to have an opinion of your own. Most journalists use sites like www.gamerankings.com just to be on the safe side. Some of them have actually told me this. You wouldn't want to go against the grain, no sir. That would be suicide, because most hardcore readers buy several mags each month and their opinions are, of course, heavily influenced by what they read most often.

I'll give you two examples to clarify this. First, *Enter The Matrix*, a highly controversial game to say the least. Anyone who plays the game will almost instantly notice that it lacks (a lot of) polish and was obviously rushed into stores. But hang on, the fighting system is kind of good – no, wait, it's even great! Do we read this in reviews of the game? Not as often as we should. Reviewers are too busy pounding the game into the ground because in some way or another we seem to have agreed that this game sucks.

Still, it sells a million, all thanks to the hype? Partly, but there are gamers out there who love the fighting as well, and rightly so. Are they blind to the terrible racing and hovercraft levels? No, but they enjoy what's there. The same goes for *MOH: Rising Sun*. Now, I have played them all, both on PC and PlayStation2. What do I love about the series? I especially like the history, the settings, the music and the overall immersion. Don't get me wrong: I'm the first to admit *Rising Sun* doesn't come close to its predecessors. The graphics are bland, but they do get better towards the end of the game. As far as AI goes, the enemy can be extremely stupid, but the other *MOH* games had some of the same issues, although admittedly to a lesser degree. 'So what's good about this game?' you're asking. It's not as linear as the others. You do have alternatives. The online mode is decent, especially in comparison to other PS2 online shooters. And please, don't even start to compare it to PC games – a lot of PS2 owners don't have a monster PC. But one thing I liked a lot about *Rising Sun* wasn't mentioned in any review I read: the letters from home. For the first time in the series and in this sort of games we got to experience the homesickness, which gave more of an insight into the character you're playing with.

Does this all account for nothing? Are we blind to innovation if the rest of the game isn't as good as it should be? Apparently. Again, these are not great games, but they have nice features that are overlooked. One guy even told me that a game is either good or bad, that you have to review objectively. Well, wake up and smell the coffee – your perception of everything in this world is subjective, including games. Of course you can use your knowledge of games to make a solid comparison. As I see it, a good review states 'the facts' about the game as objectively as humanly possible and the conclusion includes your outspoken subjective opinion, which is partly

"Consoles that rely on parallel processing yield amazing games from amazing code houses and mediocre games from pretty much everyone else, because parallel processing is complex"

Was the combat in *Enter The Matrix* overlooked by reviewers who failed to appreciate the big picture? Faberlinck, a game journalist himself, believes so



reflected in the score. A score – as **Edge** once rightly pointed out – should mean almost nothing to the reader. By reading a good review they can make up their own mind, and that's what writing reviews is all about to me. I'm afraid I'll be forced to change my ways in the future, just to fit into the mould. It seems that I'm alone in this.

One more thing to fellow journalists concerning gaming: games have never been better and will continue to get even better, but I'm quite sure that we won't be able to say the same thing about most reviews. It's a conclusion I don't like to make, but ultimately have to.

Faberlinck

Reviews won't get better? Watch this space...

Your comments about the hardcore community taking issue with guides because of their ruinous effect on any sort of challenge (**E**135) may have a certain degree of truth, but don't really cover my major problem with them. Games may or may not be too hard, but one thing is certain: to the first timer they are impossible.

To the newcomer games are a confusing world, with many hidden rules that the majority of gamers internalised many years ago. I remember a letter in these very pages a few years back where a reader had persuaded his mother to try *Ico*. After finding the switch to open the first door her next question was 'what do I do now?' Obvious stuff to us, of course, but that's because we've been trained to understand gaming logic, not common sense. We know that as long as you hide for long enough in a stealth title the guards will forget you ever existed, we know that red keys open red doors, we know only one person in an RPG has the answer to our questions, and the real game is to find them.

What game guides do is allow this to continue. Hardened gamers use their gaming sense (if you will) but the great unwashed have no time to learn the many rules which are never explained but continue to dominate our game worlds. The industry is again failing to shirk its 'local shop for local people' image. We can't turn to new gamers and say 'If you don't get it, buy a guide,' and expect them to waste more money. Games are meant to be a fathomable challenge to the newcomer, and presenting them with the equivalent of the crossword puzzle helpline is not the way forward.

Mike McCarthy

Yes, to the outsider most videogame logic must seem plain dumb, but it's just one more symptom of the form's relative infancy. Perhaps one day you *will* only need a brain in order to play. Here's another letter on the topic:

I am writing regarding the Trigger Happy article in **E**134. I am so glad that the issue of games culture's placid acceptance of absurd rules and restrictions is finally receiving some attention. However, the approach taken in this article seems to me a little misplaced. Attempts to portray a higher degree of naturalism in videogames are hampered by the obvious limitation of the control system. The number of buttons must obviously be limited to a useable amount, but this in turn limits the possible actions that can be performed. This can of course be overcome by the constant changing of the button map, but this results in the type of chaotic lack of control that so exemplified the experience of playing *True Crime*.

The only way that these restrictions can be made invisible is through a careful construction of plot and pacing. Driving games do not suffer from these 'new absurdities' as their realism increases, as their plot allows a seamless mapping of the control system to the actions required in the game, and the driver's inability to get out of the car and beat it with a branch is never highlighted to the player as both plot and pace make this type of activity irrelevant.

It is the idea of constructing a 'horizon of possibility' (see Paul Ricoure's writings on time and narrative for more info) for the player, a control system that makes sense because it fits with the actions required by the plot and pace of the game; it's not so much that their rules and restrictions are arbitrary and absurd, but that the plot of the game is. It is not just videogames that cause the average person to say 'why did that happen?' as films with implausible and ill-conceived plots elicit the same response. What we have grown complacent about is being presented with a plot and pace that construct the foundations of a plausible world, accepting instead a string of below-par rip-offs of vastly over-exploited genres. This may, along with making games that are decidedly more satisfying to play, finally start to create software that appeals to a wider audience.

Adam Pitt

In response to Lee Hawley's incredulity at the actions of a game retailer in **E**135, I thought I may as well share a couple of my similar experiences while we're all on the subject. When browsing in a local independent videogames shop, I eavesdropped upon a young boy (around eight years old) pick up a copy of *GTAIII* and, thrusting into his grandmother's face, said: "Hey, this is that game where you get to kill prostitutes that I was telling you about!" The elderly woman replied with a typically detached "Wow, great," and presumably added it to her shopping list.

When I was talking to a friend of mine about games, he spoke of his grandma playing some videogames. "Really?" I said, "your gran plays videogames?" "Oh, yeah," he replied, "she loves *Grand Theft Auto*. She says that she loves killing all those prostitutes!"

Oh, and by the way, it was nice to see **Edge** try its hand at something a bit different with 'Spaced/Invaded' in **E**134. And I was also rather surprised by the reference to Jason Stollsteimer in your preview of *Residential Evil 4* in **E**135.

Grandmothers take liberal views on murdering digital harlots, **Edge** writes a decent short story *and* listens to the Von Bondies?

And on that bombshell...

Robert Brown

"The industry is failing to shirk its 'local shop for local people' image. We can't turn to new gamers and say, 'If you don't get it, buy a guide,' and expect them to waste more money"

Next month







Sudeki
page 032 (Xbox)



Onimusha 3: Demon Siege
page 034 (PS2)



Final Fantasy XI
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Thief: Deadly Shadows
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Mercenaries
page 054 (PS2)



STALKER: Shadow Of Chernobyl
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Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater
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The Legend Of Zelda: Four Swords+
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Unreal Tournament 2004
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